

THE EARTHLY PARADISE
IN TWELVE PARTS

THE EARTHLY
PARADISE: A POEM
BY WILLIAM MORRIS

PART V

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS
THE LADY OF THE LAND
THE SON OF CRÆSUS
THE WATCHING OF THE FALCON

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JUNE

O JUNE, O June, that we desired so,
Wilt thou not make us happy on this day?
Across the river thy soft breezes blow
Sweet with the scent of beanfields far away,
Above our heads rustle the aspens grey,
Calm is the sky with harmless clouds beset,
No thought of storm the morning vexes yet.

See, we have left our hopes and fears behind
To give our very hearts up unto thee;
What better place than this then could we find
By this sweet stream that knows not of the sea,
That guesses not the city's misery,
This little stream whose hamlets scarce have names,
This far-off, lonely mother of the Thames?

Here then, O June, thy kindness will we take;
And if indeed but pensive men we seem,
What should we do? thou wouldst not have us wake
From out the arms of this rare happy dream
And wish to leave the murmur of the stream,
The rustling boughs, the twitter of the birds,
And all thy thousand peaceful happy words.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

NOW in the early June they deemed it good
That they should go unto a house that stood
On their chief river, so upon a day
With favouring wind and tide they took their way
Up the fair stream; most lovely was the time
Even amidst the days of that fair clime,
And still the wanderers thought about their lives,
And that desire that rippling water gives
To youthful hearts to wander anywhere.

So midst sweet sights and sounds a house most fair
They came to, set upon the river side
Where kindly folk their coming did abide;
There they took land, and in the lime-trees' shade
Beneath the trees they found the fair feast laid,
And sat, well pleased; but when the water-hen
Had got at last to think them harmless men,
And they with rest, and pleasure, and old wine,
Began to feel immortal and divine,
An elder spoke, "O gentle friends, the day
Amid such calm delight now slips away,
And ye yourselves are grown so bright and glad
I care not if I tell you something sad;
Sad, though the life I tell you of passed by,
Unstained by sordid strife or misery;
Sad, because though a glorious end it tells,
Yet on the end of glorious life it dwells,
And striving through all things to reach the best
Upon no midway happiness will rest."

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

ARGUMENT

ADMETUS, King of Pheræ in Thessaly, received unwittingly Apollo as his servant, by the help of whom he won to wife Alcestis, daughter of Pelias: afterwards too, as in other things, so principally in this, Apollo gave him help, that when he came to die, he obtained of the Fates for him, that if another would die willingly in his stead, then he should live still; and when to every one else this seemed impossible, Alcestis gave her life for her husband's.

MIDST sunny grass-clad meads that slope adown
To lake Bœbeis stands an ancient town,
Where dwelt of old a lord of Thessaly,
The son of Pheres and fair Clymene,
Who had to name Admetus: long ago
The dwellers by the lake have ceased to know
His name, because the world grows old, but then
He was accounted great among great men;
Young, strong, and godlike, lacking nought at all
Of gifts that unto royal men might fall
In those old simple days, before men went
To gather unseen harm and discontent,
Along with all the alien merchandise
That rich folk need, too restless to be wise.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Now on the fairest of all autumn eves,
When midst the dusty, crumpled, dying leaves
The black grapes showed, and every press and vat
Was newly scoured, this King Admetus sat
Among his people, wearied in such wise
By hopeful toil as makes a paradise
Of the rich earth; for light and far away
Seemed all the labour of the coming day,
And no man wished for more than then he had,
Nor with another's mourning was made glad.
There in the pillared porch, their supper done,
They watched the fair departing of the sun;
The while the soft-eyed well-girt maidens poured
The joy of life from out the jars long stored
Deep in the earth, while little like a king,
As we call kings, but glad with everything,
The wise Thessalian sat and blessed his life,
So free from sickening fear and foolish strife.

But midst the joy of this festivity,
Turning aside he saw a man draw nigh,
Along the dusty grey vine-bordered road
That had its ending at his fair abode;
He seemed e'en from afar to set his face
Unto the King's adorned reverend place,
And like a traveller went he wearily,
And yet as one who seems his rest to see.
A staff he bore, but nowise was he bent
With scrip or wallet; so withal he went
Straight to the King's high seat, and standing near,
Seemed a stout youth and noble, free from fear,
But peaceful and unarmed; and though ill clad,

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

And though the dust of that hot land he had
Upon his limbs and face, as fair was he
As any king's son you might lightly see,
Grey-eyed and crisp-haired, beautiful of limb,
And no ill eye the women cast on him.

But kneeling now, and stretching forth his hand,
He said, "O thou, the king of this fair land,
Unto a banished man some shelter give,
And help me with thy goods that I may live :
Thou hast good store, Admetus, yet may I,
Who kneel before thee now in misery,
Give thee more gifts before the end shall come
Than all thou hast laid safely in thine home."

"Rise up, and be my guest," Admetus said,
"I need no gifts for this poor gift of bread,
The land is wide, and bountiful enow.
What thou canst do, to-morrow thou shalt show,
And be my man, perchance ; but this night rest
Not questioned more than any passing guest.
Yea, even if a great king thou hast spilt,
Thou shalt not answer aught but as thou wilt."

Then the man rose and said, "O King, indeed
Of thine awarded silence have I need.
Nameless I am, nameless what I have done
Must be through many circles of the sun.
But for to-morrow—let me rather tell
On this same eve what things I can do well,
And let me put mine hand in thine and swear
To serve thee faithfully a changing year ;
Nor think the woods of Ossa hold one beast
That of thy tenderest yearling shall make feast,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Whiles that I guard thy flocks, and thou shalt bear
Thy troubles easier when thou com'st to hear
The music I can make. Let these thy men
Witness against me if I fail thee, when
War falls upon thy lovely land and thee."

Then the King smiled, and said, "So let it be,
Well shalt thou serve me, doing far less than this,
Nor for thy service due gifts shalt thou miss:
Behold I take thy faith with thy right hand,
Be thou true man unto this guarded land.
Ho ye! take this my guest, find raiment meet
Wherewith to clothe him; bathe his wearied feet,
And bring him back beside my throne to feast."

But to himself he said, "I am the least
Of all Thessalians if this man was born
In any earthly dwelling more forlorn
Than a king's palace."

Then a damsel slim
Led him inside, nought loth to go with him,
And when the cloud of steam had curled to meet
Within the brass his wearied dusty feet,
She from a carved press brought him linen fair,
And a new-woven coat a king might wear,
And so being clad he came unto the feast,
But as he came again, all people ceased
What talk they held soever, for they thought
A very god among them had been brought;
And doubly glad the king Admetus was
At what that dying eve had brought to pass,
And bade him sit by him and feast his fill.

So there they sat till all the world was still,

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

And 'twixt the pillars their red torches' shine
Held forth unto the night a joyous sign.

SO henceforth did this man at Pheræ dwell,
And what he set his hand to wrought right well,
And won much praise and love in everything,
And came to rule all herdsmen of the King ;
But for two things in chief his fame did grow ;
And first that he was better with the bow
Than any 'twixt Olympus and the sea,
And then that sweet, heart-piercing melody
He drew out from the rigid-seeming lyre,
And made the circle round the winter fire
More like to heaven than gardens of the May.
So many a heavy thought he chased away
From the King's heart, and softened many a hate,
And choked the spring of many a harsh debate ;
And, taught by wounds, the snatchers of the wolds
Lurked round the gates of less well-guarded folds.
Therefore Admetus loved him, yet withal,
Strange doubts and fears upon his heart did fall ;
For morns there were when he the man would meet,
His hair wreathed round with bay and blossoms sweet,
Gazing distraught into the brightening east,
Nor taking heed of either man or beast,
Or anything that was upon the earth.
Or sometimes, midst the hottest of the mirth,
Within the King's hall, would he seem to wake
As from a dream, and his stringed tortoise take

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And strike the cords unbidden, till the hall
Filled with the glorious sound from wall to wall,
Trembled and seemed as it would melt away,
And sunken down the faces weeping lay
That erewhile laughed the loudest ; only he
Stood upright, looking forward steadily
With sparkling eyes as one who cannot weep,
Until the storm of music sank to sleep.

But this thing seemed the doubtfullest of all
Unto the King, that should there chance to fall
A festal day, and folk did sacrifice
Unto the gods, ever by some device
The man would be away : yet with all this
His presence doubled all Admetus' bliss,
And happy in all things he seemed to live,
And great gifts to his herdsman did he give.

But now the year came round again to spring,
And southward to Iolchos went the King ;
For there did Pelias hold a sacrifice
Unto the gods, and put forth things of price
For men to strive for in the people's sight ;
So on a morn of April, fresh and bright,
Admetus shook the golden-studded reins,
And soon from windings of the sweet-banked lanes
The south wind blew the sound of hoof and wheel,
Clatter of brazen shields and clink of steel
Unto the herdsman's ears, who stood awhile
Hearkening the echoes with a godlike smile,
Then slowly gat him foldwards, murmuring,
"Fair music for the wooing of a King."

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

But in six days again Admetus came,
With no lost labour or dishonoured name ;
A scarlet cloak upon his back he bare,
A gold crown on his head, a falchion fair
Girt to his side ; behind him four white steeds,
Whose dams had fed full in Nisæan meads ;
All prizes that his valiant hands had won
Within the guarded lists of Tyro's son.
Yet midst the sound of joyous minstrelsy
No joyous man in truth he seemed to be ;
So that folk looking on him said, " Behold,
The wise King will not show himself too bold
Amidst his greatness : the gods too are great,
And who can tell the dreadful ways of fate ? "

Howe'er it was, he gat him through the town,
And midst their shouts at last he lighted down
At his own house, and held high feast that night ;
And yet by seeming had but small delight
In aught that any man could do or say :
And on the morrow, just at dawn of day,
Rose up and clad himself, and took his spear,
And in the fresh and blossom-scented air
Went wandering till he reached Bœbeis' shore ;
Yet by his troubled face set little store
By all the songs of birds and scent of flowers ;
Yea, rather unto him the fragrant hours
Were grown but dull and empty of delight.

So going, at the last he came in sight
Of his new herdsman, who that morning lay
Close by the white sand of a little bay
The teeming ripple of Bœbeis lapped ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

There he in cloak of white-wooled sheepskin wrapped
Against the cold dew, free from trouble sang,
The while the heifers' bells about him rang
And mingled with the sweet soft-throated birds
And bright fresh ripple: listen, then, these words
Will tell the tale of his felicity,
Halting and void of music though they be.

SONG

O DWELLERS on the lovely earth,
Why will ye break your rest and mirth
To weary us with fruitless prayer;
Why will ye toil and take such care
For children's children yet unborn,
And garner store of strife and scorn
To gain a scarce-remembered name,
Cumbered with lies and soiled with shame?
And if the gods care not for you,
What is this folly ye must do
To win some mortal's feeble heart?
O fools! when each man plays his part,
And heeds his fellow little more
Than these blue waves that kiss the shore
Take heed of how the daisies grow.
O fools! and if ye could but know
How fair a world to you is given.

O brooder on the hills of heaven,
When for my sin thou drav'st me forth,

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

Hadst thou forgot what this was worth,
Thine own hand had made? The tears of men,
The death of threescore years and ten,
The trembling of the timorous race—
Had these things so bedimmed the place
Thine own hand made, thou couldst not know
To what a heaven the earth might grow
If fear beneath the earth were laid,
If hope failed not, nor love decayed.

He stopped, for he beheld his wandering lord,
Who, drawing near, heard little of his word,
And noted less; for in that haggard mood
Nought could he do but o'er his sorrows brood,
Whate'er they were, but now being come anigh,
He lifted up his drawn face suddenly,
And as the singer gat him to his feet,
His eyes Admetus' troubled eyes did meet,
As with some speech he now seemed labouring,
Which from his heart his lips refused to bring.
Then spoke the herdsman, "Master, what is this,
That thou, returned with honour to the bliss,
The gods have given thee here, still makest show
To be some wretch bent with the weight of woe?
What wilt thou have? What help there is in me
Is wholly thine, for in felicity
Within thine house thou still hast let me live,
Nor grudged most noble gifts to me to give."

"Yea," said Admetus, "thou canst help indeed,
But as the spring shower helps the unsown mead.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Yet listen : at Iolchos the first day
Unto Diana's house I took my way,
Where all men gathered ere the games began.
There, at the right side of the royal man,
Who rules Iolchos, did his daughter stand,
Who with a suppliant bough in her right hand
Headed the band of maidens ; but to me
More than a goddess did she seem to be,
Nor fit to die ; and therewithal I thought
That we had all been thither called for nought
But that her bridegroom Pelias might choose,
And with that thought desire did I let loose,
And striving not with Love, I gazed my fill,
As one who will not fear the coming ill :
Ah, foolish were mine eyes, foolish my heart,
To strive in such a marvel to have part !
What god shall wed her rather ? no more fear
Than vexes Pallas vexed her forehead clear,
Faith shone from out her eyes, and on her lips
Unknown love trembled ; the Phœnician ships
Within their dark holds nought so precious bring
As her soft golden hair, no daintiest thing
I ever saw was half so wisely wrought
As was her rosy ear ; beyond all thought,
All words to tell of, her veiled body showed,
As, by the image of the Three-formed bowed,
She laid her offering down ; then I drawn near
The murmuring of her gentle voice could hear,
As waking one hears music in the morn,
Ere yet the fair June sun is fully born ;
And sweeter than the roses fresh with dew

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

Sweet odours floated round me, as she drew
Some golden thing from out her balmy breast
With her right hand, the while her left hand pressed
The hidden wonders of her girdlestead ;
And when abashed I sank adown my head,
Dreading the god of Love, my eyes must meet
The happy bands about her perfect feet.

“What more? thou know'st perchance what thing
love is?

Kindness, and hot desire, and rage, and bliss,
None first a moment ; but before that day
No love I knew but what might pass away
When hot desire was changed to certainty,
Or not abide much longer ; e'en such stings
Had smitten me, as the first warm day brings
When March is dying ; but now half a god
The crowded way unto the lists I trod,
Yet hopeless as a vanquished god at whiles,
And hideous seemed the laughter and the smiles,
And idle talk about me on the way.

“But none could stand before me on that day,
I was as god-possessed, not knowing how
The King had brought her forth but for a show,
To make his glory greater through the land :
Therefore at last victorious did I stand
Among my peers, nor yet one well-known name
Had gathered any honour from my shame.
For there indeed both men of Thessaly,
Ætolians, Thebans, dwellers by the sea,
And folk of Attica and Argolis,
Arcadian woodmen, islanders, whose bliss

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Is to be tossed about from wave to wave,
All these at last to me the honour gave,
Nor did they grudge it: yea, and one man said,
A wise Thessalian with a snowy head,
And voice grown thin with age, 'O Pelias,
Surely to thee no evil thing it was
That to thy house this rich Thessalian
Should come, to prove himself a valiant man
Amongst these heroes; for if I be wise
By dint of many years, with wistful eyes
Doth he behold thy daughter, this fair maid;
And surely, if the matter were well weighed,
Good were it both for thee and for the land
That he should take the damsel by the hand
And lead her hence, for ye near neighbours dwell;
What sayest thou, King, have I said ill or well?'

"With that must I, a fool, stand forth and ask
If yet there lay before me some great task
That I must do ere I the maid should wed,
But Pelias, looking on us, smiled and said,
'O neighbour of Larissa, and thou too,
O King Admetus, this may seem to you
A little matter; yea, and for my part
E'en such a marriage would make glad my heart;
But we the blood of Salmoneus who share
With godlike gifts great burdens also bear,
Nor is this maid without them, for the day
On which her maiden zone she puts away
Shall be her death-day, if she wed with one
By whom this marvellous thing may not be done.
For in the traces neither must steeds paw

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

Before my threshold, or white oxen draw
The wain that comes my maid to take from me,
Far other beasts that day her slaves must be :
The yellow lion 'neath the lash must roar,
And by his side unscared, the forest boar
Toil at the draught : what sayest thou then hereto,
O lord of Pheræ, wilt thou come to woo
In such a chariot, and win endless fame,
Or turn thine eyes elsewhere with little shame ?'

"What answered I? O herdsman, I was mad
With sweet love and the triumph I had had.
I took my father's ring from off my hand,
And said, 'O heroes of the Grecian land,
Be witnesses that on my father's name
For this man's promise, do I take the shame
Of this deed undone, if I fail herein ;
Fear not, O Pelias, but that I shall win
This ring from thee, when I shall come again
Through fair Iolchos, driving that strange wain.
Else by this token, thou, O King, shalt have
Pheræ my home, while on the tumbling wave
A hollow ship my sad abode shall be.'

"So driven by some hostile deity,
Such words I said, and with my gifts hard won,
But little valued now, set out upon
My homeward way : but nearer as I drew
To mine abode, and ever fainter grew
In my weak heart the image of my love,
In vain with fear my boastful folly strove ;
For I remembered that no god I was
Though I had chanced my fellows to surpass ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And I began to mind me in a while
What murmur rose, with what a mocking smile,
Pelias stretched out his hand to take the ring,
Made by my drunkard's gift now twice a king :
And when unto my palace-door I came
I had awakened fully to my shame ;
For certainly no help is left to me,
But I must get me down unto the sea
And build a keel, and whatso things I may
Set in her hold, and cross the watery way
Whither Jove bids, and the rough winds may blow,
Unto a land where none my folly know,
And there begin a weary life anew."

Eager and bright the herdsman's visage grew
The while this tale was told, and at the end
He said, " Admetus, I thy life may mend,
And thou at lovely Pheræ still may dwell ;
Wait for ten days, and then may all be well,
And thou to fetch thy maiden home may go,
And to the King thy team unheard-of show.
And if not, then make ready for the sea ;
Nor will I fail indeed to go with thee,
And 'twixt the halyards and the ashen oar
Finish the service well begun ashore ;
But meanwhile do I bid thee hope the best ;
And take another herdsman for the rest,
For unto Ossa must I go alone
To do a deed not easy to be done."

Then springing up he took his spear and bow
And northward by the lake-shore 'gan to go ;

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

But the King gazed upon him as he went,
Then, sighing, turned about, and homeward bent
His lingering steps, and hope began to spring
Within his heart, for some betokening
He seemed about the herdsman now to see
Of one from mortal cares and troubles free.

And so midst hopes and fears day followed day,
Until at last upon his bed he lay
When the grey, creeping dawn had now begun
To make the wide world ready for the sun
On the tenth day : sleepless had been the night,
And now in that first hour of gathering light
For weariness he slept, and dreamed that he
Stood by the border of a fair, calm sea
At point to go a-shipboard, and to leave
Whatever from his sire he did receive
Of land or kingship ; and withal he dreamed
That through the cordage a bright light there gleamed
Far off within the east ; and nowise sad
He felt at leaving all he might have had,
But rather as a man who goes to see
Some heritage expected patiently.
But when he moved to leave the firm fixed shore,
The windless sea rose high and 'gan to roar,
And from the gangway thrust the ship aside,
Until he hung over a chasm wide
Vocal with furious waves, yet had no fear
For all the varied tumult he might hear,
But slowly woke up to the morning light
That to his eyes seemed past all memory bright,
And then strange sounds he heard, whereat his heart

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Woke up to joyous life with one glad start,
And nigh his bed he saw the herdsman stand,
Holding a long white staff in his right hand,
Carved with strange figures; and withal he said,
 "Awake, Admetus! loiter not a-bed,
But haste thee to bring home thy promised bride,
For now an ivory chariot waits outside,
Yoked to such beasts as Pelias bade thee bring;
Whose guidance thou shalt find an easy thing,
If in thine hands thou holdest still this rod,
Whereon are carved the names of every god
That rules the fertile earth; but having come
Unto King Pelias' well-adornéd home,
Abide not long, but take the royal maid,
And let her dowry in thy wain be laid,
Of silver and fine cloth and unmixed gold,
For this indeed will Pelias not withhold
When he shall see thee like a very god.
Then let thy beasts, ruled by this carven rod,
Turn round to Pheræ; yet must thou abide
Before thou comest to the streamlet's side
That feed its dykes; there, by the little wood
Wherein unto Diana men shed blood,
Will I await thee, and thou shalt descend
And hand-in-hand afoot through Pheræ wend;
And yet I bid thee, this night let thy bride
Apart among the womenfolk abide;
That on the morrow thou with sacrifice
For these strange deeds may pay a fitting price."

But as he spoke with something like to awe,

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

His eyes and much-changed face Admetus saw,
And voiceless like a slave his words obeyed ;
For rising up no more delay he made,
But took the staff and gained the palace-door
Where stood the beasts, whose mingled whine and roar
Had wrought his dream ; there two and two they stood,
Thinking, it might be, of the tangled wood,
And all the joys of the food-hiding trees,
But harmless as their painted images
'Neath some dread spell ; then, leaping up, he took
The reins in hand and the bossed leather shook,
And no delay the conquered beasts durst make
But drew, not silent ; and folk just awake
When he went by, as though a god they saw,
Fell on their knees, and maidens come to draw
Fresh water from the fount sank trembling down,
And silence held the babbling wakened town.

So 'twixt the dewy hedges did he wend,
And still their noise afar the beasts did send,
His strange victorious advent to proclaim,
Till to Iolchos at the last he came,
And drew anigh the gates, whence in affright
The guards fled, helpless at the wondrous sight ;
And through the town news of the coming spread
Of some great god so that the scared priests led
Pale suppliants forth ; who, in unmeet attire
And hastily-caught boughs and smouldering fire
Within their censers, in the market-place
Awaited him with many an upturned face,
Trembling with fear of that unnamed new god ;
But through the midst of them his lions trod

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

With noiseless feet, nor noted aught their prey,
And the boars' hooves went pattering on the way,
While from their churning tusks the white foam flew
As raging, helpless, in the trace they drew.

But Pelias, knowing all the work of fate,
Sat in his brazen-pillared porch to wait
The coming of the King; the while the maid
In her fair marriage garments was arrayed,
And from strong places of his treasury
Men brought fine scarlet from the Syrian sea,
And works of brass, and ivory, and gold;
But when the strange yoked beasts he did behold
Come through the press of people terrified,
Then he arose and o'er the clamour cried,
"Hail, thou, who like a very god art come
To bring great honour to my damsel's home;"
And when Admetus tightened rein before
The gleaming, brazen-wrought, half-opened door,
He cried to Pelias, "Hail, to thee, O King;
Let me behold once more my father's ring,
Let me behold the prize that I have won,
Mine eyes are wearying now to look upon."

"Fear not," he said, "the Fates are satisfied;
Yet wilt thou not descend and here abide,
Doing me honour till the next bright morn
Has dried the dew upon the new-sprung corn,
That we in turn may give the honour due
To such a man that such a thing can do,
And unto all the gods may sacrifice?"

"Nay," said Admetus, "if thou call'st me wise,
And like a very god thou dost me deem,

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

Shall I abide the ending of the dream
And so gain nothing? nay, let me be glad
That I at least one godlike hour have had
At whatsoever time I come to die,
That I may mock the world that passes by,
And yet forgets it." Saying this, indeed,
Of Pelias did he seem to take small heed,
But spoke as one unto himself may speak,
And still the half-shut door his eyes did seek,
Wherethrough from distant rooms sweet music came,
Setting his over-strained heart a-flame,
Because amidst the Lydian flutes he thought
From place to place his love the maidens brought.

Then Pelias said, "What can I give to thee
Who fail'st so little of divinity?
Yet let my slaves lay these poor gifts within
Thy chariot, while my daughter strives to win
The favour of the spirits of this place,
Since from their altars she must turn her face
For ever now; hearken, her flutes I hear,
From the last chapel doth she draw anear."

Then by Admetus' feet the folk 'gan pile
The precious things, but he no less the while
Stared at the door ajar, and thought it long
Ere with the flutes mingled the maidens' song,
And both grew louder, and the scarce-seen floor
Was fluttering with white raiment, and the door
By slender fingers was set open wide,
And midst her damsels he beheld the bride
Ungirt, with hair unbound and garlanded:
Then Pelias took her slender hand and said,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

“ Daughter, this is the man that takes from thee
Thy curse midst women, think no more to be
Childless, unloved, and knowing little bliss ;
But now behold how like a god he is,
And yet with what prayers for the love of thee
He must have wearied some divinity,
And therefore in thine inmost heart be glad
That thou ’mongst women such a man hast had.”

Then she with wondering eyes that strange team saw
A moment, then as one with gathering awe
Might turn from Jove’s bird unto very Jove,
So did she raise her grey eyes to her love,
But to her brow the blood rose therewithal,
And she must tremble, such a look did fall
Upon her faithful eyes, that none the less
Would falter aught, for all her shamefastness,
But rather to her lover’s hungry eyes
Gave back a tender look of glad surprise,
Wherein love’s flame began to flicker now.

Withal, her father kissed her on the brow,
And said, “ O daughter, take this royal ring,
And set it on the finger of the King,
And come not back ; and thou, Admetus, pour
This wine to Jove before my open door,
And glad at heart take back thine own with thee.”

Then with that word Alcestis silently,
And with no look cast back, and ring in hand,
Went forth, and soon beside her love did stand,
Nor on his finger failed to set the ring ;
And then a golden cup the city’s King
Gave to him, and he poured and said, “ O thou,

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

From whatsoever place thou lookest now,
What prayers, what gifts unto thee shall I give
That we a little time with love may live?
A little time of love, then fall asleep
Together, while the crown of love we keep."

So spake he, and his strange beasts turned about,
And heeded not the people's wavering shout
That from their old fear and new pleasure sprung,
Nor noted aught of what the damsels sung,
Or of the flowers that after them they cast,
But like a dream the guarded city passed,
And 'twixt the song of birds and blossoms' scent
It seemed for many hundred years they went,
Though short the way was unto Pheræ's gates;
Time they forgot, and gods, and men, and fates,
However nigh unto their hearts they were;
The woodland boars, the yellow lords of fear
No more seemed strange to them, but all the earth
With all its changing sorrow and wild mirth
In that fair hour seemed new-born to the twain,
Grief seemed a play forgot, a pageant vain,
A picture painted, who knows where or when,
With soulless images of restless men;
For every thought but love was now gone by,
And they forgot that they should ever die.

But when they came anigh the sacred wood,
There, bidding them, Admetus' herdsman stood,
At sight of whom those yoke-fellows unchecked
Stopped dead and little of Admetus recked
Who now, as one from dreams not yet awake,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Drew back his love and did his wain forsake,
And gave the carven rod and guiding bands
Into the waiting herdsman's outstretched hands,
But when he would have thanked him for the thing
That he had done, his speechless tongue must cling
Unto his mouth, and why he could not tell.
But the man said, "No words! thou hast done well
To me, as I to thee; the day may come
When thou shalt ask me for a fitting home,
Nor shalt thou ask in vain; but hasten now,
And to thine house this royal maiden show,
Then give her to thy women for this night.
But when thou wakest up to thy delight
To-morrow, do all things that should be done,
Nor of the gods, forget thou any one,
And on the next day will I come again
To tend thy flocks upon the grassy plain.

"But now depart, and from thine home send here
Chariot and horse, these gifts of thine to bear
Unto thine house, and going, look not back
Lest many a wished-for thing thou com'st to lack."

Then hand in hand together, up the road
The lovers passed unto the King's abode,
And as they went, the whining snort and roar
From the yoked beasts they heard break out once more
And then die off, as they were led away,
But whether to some place lit up by day,
Or, 'neath the earth, they knew not, for the twain
Went hastening on, nor once looked back again.

But soon the minstrels met them, and a band
Of white-robed damsels flowery boughs in hand,

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

To bid them welcome to that pleasant place,
Then they, rejoicing much, in no long space
Came to the brazen-pillared porch, whereon
From 'twixt the passes of the hills yet shone
The dying sun ; and there she stood awhile
Without the threshold, a faint tender smile
Trembling upon her lips 'twixt love and shame,
Until each side of her a maiden came
And raised her in their arms, that her fair feet
The polished brazen threshold might not meet,
And in Admetus' house she stood at last.

But to the women's chamber straight she passed
Bepraised of all,—and so the wakeful night
Lonely the lovers passed e'en as they might.

But the next day, with many a sacrifice,
Admetus wrought, for such a well-won prize,
A life so blest, the gods to satisfy,
And many a matchless beast that day did die
Upon the altars ; nought unlucky seemed
To be amid the joyous crowd that gleamed
With gold and precious things, and only this
Seemed wanting to the King of Pheræ's bliss,
That all these pageants should be soon past by,
And hid by night the fair spring blossoms lie.

YET on the morrow-morn Admetus came,
A haggard man oppressed with grief and shame,
Unto the spot beside Bæbeis' shore
Whereby he met his herdsman once before,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And there again he found him flushed and glad,
And from the babbling water newly clad ;
Then he with downcast eyes these words began,

“O thou, whatso thy name is, god or man,
Hearken to me ; meseemeth of thy deed
Some dread immortal taketh angry heed.

“Last night the height of my desire seemed won,
All day my weary eyes had watched the sun
Rise up and sink, and now was come the night
When I should be alone with my delight ;
Silent the house was now from floor to roof,
And in the well-hung chambers, far aloof,
The feasters lay ; the moon was in the sky,
The soft spring wind was wafting lovingly
Across the gardens fresh scents to my sweet,
As, troubled with the sound of my own feet,
I passed betwixt the pillars, whose long shade
Black on the white red-veinéd floor was laid :
So happy was I that the briar-rose,
Rustling outside within the flowery close,
Seemed but Love’s odorous wing—too real all seemed
For such a joy as I had never dreamed.

“Why do I linger, as I lingered not
In that fair hour, now ne’er to be forgot
While my life lasts ?—Upon the gilded door
I laid my hand ; I stood upon the floor
Of the bride-chamber, and I saw the bride,
Lovelier than any dream, stand by the side
Of the gold bed, with hands that hid her face :
One cry of joy I gave, and then the place
Seemed changed to hell as in a hideous dream.

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

“Still did the painted silver pillars gleam
Betwixt the scented torches and the moon ;
Still did the garden shed its odorous boon
Upon the night ; still did the nightingale
Unto his brooding mate tell all his tale :
But, risen 'twixt my waiting love and me,
As soundless as the dread eternity,
Sprung up from nothing, could mine eyes behold
A huge dull-gleaming dreadful coil that rolled
In changing circles on the pavement fair.
Then for the sword that was no longer there
My hand sank to my side ; around I gazed,
And 'twixt the coils I met her grey eyes, glazed
With sudden horror most unspeakable ;
And when mine own upon no weapon fell,
For what should weapons do in such a place,
Unto the dragon's head I set my face,
And raised bare hands against him, but a cry
Burst on mine ears of utmost agony
That nailed me there, and she cried out to me,
' O get thee hence ; alas, I cannot flee !
They coil about me now, my lips to kiss.
O love, why hast thou brought me unto this ?'
“ Alas, my shame ! trembling, away I slunk,
Yet turning saw the fearful coil had sunk
To whence it came, my love's limbs freed I saw,
And a long breath at first I heard her draw
As one redeemed, then heard the hard sobs come,
And wailings for her new accurséd home.
But there outside across the door I lay,
Like a scourged hound, until the dawn of day ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And as her gentle breathing then I heard
As though she slept, before the earliest bird
Began his song, I wandered forth to seek
Thee, O strange man, e'en as thou seest me, weak
With all the torment of the night, and shamed
With such a shame as never shall be named
To aught but thee—Yea, yea, and why to thee?
Perchance this ends all thou wilt do for me—
What then, and have I not a cure for that?
Lo, yonder is a rock where I have sat
Full many an hour while yet my life was life,
With hopes of all the coming wonder rife.
No sword hangs by my side, no god will turn
This cloudless hazy blue to black, and burn
My useless body with his lightning flash;
But the white waves above my bones may wash,
And when old chronicles our house shall name
They may leave out the letters and the shame,
That make Admetus, once a king of men—
And how could I be worse or better then?"

As one who notes a curious instrument
Working against the maker's own intent,
The herdsman eyed his wan face silently,
And smiling for a while, and then said he,—
"Admetus, thou, in spite of all I said,
Hast drawn this evil thing upon thine head,
Forgetting her who erewhile laid the curse
Upon the maiden, so for fear of worse
Go back again; for fair-limbed Artemis
Now bars the sweet attainment of thy bliss;

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

So taking heart, yet make no more delay
But worship her upon this very day,
Nor spare for aught, and of thy trouble make
No semblance unto any for her sake ;
And thicken upon the fair bride-chamber floor
Strew dittany, and on each side the door
Hang up such poppy-leaves as spring may yield ;
And for the rest, myself may be a shield
Against her wrath—nay, be thou not too bold
To ask me that which may not now be told.
Yea, even what thou deemest, hide it deep
Within thine heart, and let thy wonder sleep,
For surely thou shalt one day know my name,
When the time comes again that autumn's flame
Is dying off the vine-boughs, overturned,
Stripped of their wealth. But now let gifts be burned
To her I told thee of, and in three days
Shall I by many hard and rugged ways
Have come to thee again to bring thee peace.
Go, the sun rises and the shades decrease."

Then, thoughtfully, Admetus gat him back,
Nor did the altars of the Huntress lack
The fattest of the flocks upon that day.
But when night came, in arms Admetus lay
Across the threshold of the bride-chamber,
And nought amiss that night he noted there,
But durst not enter, though about the door
Young poppy-leaves were twined, and on the floor,
Not flowered as yet with downy leaves and grey,
Fresh dittany beloved of wild goats lay.

But when the whole three days and nights were done,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

The herdsman came with rising of the sun,
And said, "Admetus, now rejoice again,
Thy prayers and offerings have not been in vain,
And thou at last mayst come unto thy bliss;
And if thou askest for a sign of this,
Take thou this token; make good haste to rise,
And get unto the garden-close that lies
Below these windows sweet with greenery,
And in the midst a marvel shalt thou see,
Three white, black-hearted poppies blossoming,
Though this is but the middle of the spring."

Nor was it otherwise than he had said,
And on that day with joy the twain were wed,
And 'gan to lead a life of great delight;
But the strange woeful history of that night,
The monstrous car, the promise to the King,
All these through weary hours of chiselling
Were wrought in stone, and in Diana's wall
Set up, a joy and witness unto all.

But neither so would wingéd time abide,
The changing year came round to autumn-tide,
Until at last the day was fully come
When the strange guest first reached Admetus' home.
Then, when the sun was reddening to its end,
He to Admetus' brazen porch did wend,
Whom there he found feathering a poplar dart,
Then said he, "King, the time has come to part,
Come forth, for I have that to give thine ear
No man upon the earth but thou must hear."

Then rose the King, and with a troubled look
His well-steeled spear within his hand he took,

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

And by his herdsman silently he went
As to a peakéd hill his steps he bent,
Nor did the parting servant speak one word,
As up they climbed, unto his silent lord,
Till from the top he turned about his head
From all the glory of the gold light, shed
Upon the hill-top by the setting sun,
For now indeed the day was well-nigh done,
And all the eastern vale was grey and cold ;
But when Admetus he did now behold,
Panting beside him from the steep ascent,
One much-changed godlike look on him he bent,
And said, " O mortal, listen, for I see
Thou deemest somewhat of what is in me ;
Fear not ! I love thee, even as I can
Who cannot feel the woes and ways of man
In spite of this my seeming, for indeed
Now thou beholdest Jove's immortal seed ;
And what my name is I would tell thee now,
If men who dwell upon the earth as thou
Could hear the name and live ; but on the earth,
With strange melodious stories of my birth,
Phœbus men call me, and Latona's son.

" And now my servitude with thee is done,
And I shall leave thee toiling on thine earth,
This handful, that within its little girth
Holds that which moves you so, O men that die ;
Behold, to-day thou hast felicity,
But the times change, and I can see a day
When all thine happiness shall fade away ;
And yet be merry, strive not with the end,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Thou canst not change it ; for the rest, a friend
This year has won thee who shall never fail :
But now indeed, for nought will it avail
To say what I may have in store for thee,
Of gifts that men desire ; let these things be,
And live thy life, till death itself shall come,
And turn to nought the storehouse of thine home,
Then think of me ; these feathered shafts behold,
That here have been the terror of the wold,
Take these, and count them still the best of all
Thine envied wealth, and when on thee shall fall
By any way the worst extremity,
Call upon me before thou com'st to die,
And lay these shafts with incense on a fire,
That thou mayst gain thine uttermost desire."

He ceased, but ere the golden tongue was still
An odorous mist had stolen up the hill,
And to Admetus first the god grew dim,
And then was but a lovely voice to him,
And then at last the sun had sunk to rest,
And a fresh wind blew lightly from the west
Over the hill-top, and no soul was there ;
But the sad dying autumn field-flowers fair,
Rustled dry leaves about the windy place,
Where even now had been the godlike face,
And in their midst the brass-bound quiver lay.
Then, going further westward, far away,
He saw the gleaming of Peneus wan
'Neath the white sky, but never any man,
Except a grey-haired shepherd driving down

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

From off the long slopes to his fold-yard brown
His woolly sheep, with whom a maiden went,
Singing for labour done and sweet content
Of coming rest ; with that he turned again,
And took the shafts up, never sped in vain,
And came unto his house most deep in thought
Of all the things the varied year had brought.

THENCEFORTH in bliss and honour day by day
His measured span of sweet life wore away.

A happy man he was ; no vain desire
Of foolish fame had set his heart a-fire ;
No care he had the ancient bounds to change,
Nor yet for him must idle soldiers range
From place to place about the burdened land,
Or thick upon the ruined cornfields stand ;
For him no trumpets blessed the bitter war,
Wherein the right and wrong so mingled are,
That hardly can the man of single heart
Amid the sickening turmoil choose his part ;
For him sufficed the changes of the year,
The god-sent terror was enough of fear
For him ; enough the battle with the earth,
The autumn triumph over drought and dearth.

Better to him than wolf-moved battered shields,
O'er poor dead corpses, seemed the stubble-fields
Danced down beneath the moon, until the night
Grew dreamy with a shadowy sweet delight,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And with the high-risen moon came pensive thought,
And men in love's despite must grow distraught
And loiter in the dance, and maidens drop
Their gathered raiment, and the fifer stop
His dancing notes the pensive drone that chid,
And as they wander to their dwellings, hid
By the black shadowed trees, faint melody,
Mournful and sweet, their soft good-night must be.

Far better spoil the gathering vat bore in
Unto the pressing shed, than midst the din
Of falling houses in war's waggon lies
Besmeared with redder stains than Tyrian dyes ;
Or when the temple of the sea-born one
With glittering crowns and gallant raiment shone,
Fairer the maidens seemed by no chain bound,
But such as amorous arms might cast around
Their lovely bodies, than the wretched band
Who midst the shipmen by the gangway stand ;
Each lonely in her speechless misery,
And thinking of the worse time that shall be,
When midst of folk who scarce can speak her name,
She bears the uttermost of toil and shame.

Better to him seemed that victorious crown,
That midst the reverent silence of the town
He oft would set upon some singer's brow
Than was the conqueror's diadem, blest now
By lying priests, soon, bent and bloody, hung
Within the thorn by linnets well besung,
Who think but little of the corpse beneath,
Though ancient lands have trembled at his breath.

But to this King—fair Ceres' gifts, the days

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

Whereon men sung in flushed Lyæus' praise
Tales of old time, the bloodless sacrifice
Unto the goddess of the downcast eyes
And soft persuading lips, the ringing lyre
Unto the bearer of the holy fire
Who once had been amongst them—things like these
Seemed meet to him men's yearning to appease,
These were the triumphs of the peaceful king.

And so, betwixt seed-time and harvesting,
With little fear his life must pass away ;
And for the rest, he, from the self-same day
That the god left him, seemed to have some share
In that same godhead he had harboured there :
In all things grew his wisdom and his wealth,
And folk beholding the fair state and health
Wherein his land was, said, that now at last
A fragment of the Golden Age was cast
Over the place, for there was no debate,
And men forgot the very name of hate.

Nor failed the love of her he erst had won
To hold his heart as still the years wore on,
And she, no whit less fair than on the day
When from Iolchos first she passed away,
Did all his will as though he were a god,
And loving still, the downward way she trod.

Honour and love, plenty and peace, he had ;
Nor lacked for aught that makes a wise man glad,
That makes him like a rich well-honoured guest
Scarce sorry when the time comes, for the rest,
That at the end perforce must bow his head.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And yet—was death not much remembered,
As still with happy men the manner is ?
Or, was he not so pleased with this world's bliss,
As to be sorry when the time should come
When but his name should hold his ancient home
While he dwelt nowhere ? either way indeed,
Will be enough for most men's daily need,
And with calm faces they may watch the world,
And note men's lives hither and thither hurled,
As folk may watch the unfolding of a play—
Nor this, nor that was King Admetus' way,
For neither midst the sweetness of his life
Did he forget the ending of the strife,
Nor yet for heavy thoughts of passing pain
Did all his life seem lost to him or vain,
A wasteful jest of Jove, an empty dream ;
Rather before him did a vague hope gleam,
That made him a great-hearted man and wise,
Who saw the deeds of men with far-seeing eyes,
And dealt them pitying justice still, as though
The inmost heart of each man he did know ;
This hope it was, and not his kingly place
That made men's hearts rejoice to see his face
Rise in the council hall ; through this, men felt
That in their midst a son of man there dwelt
Like and unlike them, and their friend through all ;
And still as time went on, the more would fall
This glory on the King's beloved head,
And round his life fresh hope and fear were shed.

Yet at the last his good days passed away,

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

And sick upon his bed Admetus lay,
'Twixt him and death nought but a lessening veil
Of hasty minutes, yet did hope not fail,
Nor did bewildering fear torment him then,
But still as ever, all the ways of men
Seemed clear to him : but he, while yet his breath
Still held the gateway 'gainst the arms of death,
Turned to his wife, who, bowed beside the bed,
Wept for his love, and dying goodlihead,
And bade her put all folk from out the room,
Then going to the treasury's rich gloom
To bear the arrows forth, the Lycian's gift.
So she, amidst her blinding tears, made shift
To find laid in the inmost treasury
Those shafts, and brought them unto him, but he,
Beholding them, beheld therewith his life,
Both that now past, with many marvels rife,
And that which he had hoped he yet should see.
Then spoke he faintly, " Love, 'twixt thee and me
A film has come, and I am failing fast :
And now our ancient happy life is past ;
For either this is death's dividing hand,
And all is done, or if the shadowy land
I yet escape, full surely if I live
The god with life some other gift will give,
And change me unto thee : e'en at this tide
Like a dead man among you all I bide,
Until I once again behold my guest,
And he has given me either life or rest :
Alas, my love ! that thy too loving heart
Nor with my life or death can have a part.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

O cruel words ! yet death is cruel too :
Stoop down and kiss me, for I yearn for you
E'en as the autumn yearneth for the sun.

“ O love, a little time we have been one,
And if we now are twain weep not therefore ;
For many a man on earth desireth sore
To have some mate upon the toilsome road,
Some sharer of his still increasing load,
And yet for all his longing and his pain
His troubled heart must seek for love in vain,
And till he dies still must he be alone—
But now, although our love indeed is gone,
Yet to this land as thou art leal and true
Set now thine hand to what I bid thee do,
Because I may not die ; rake up the brands
Upon the hearth, and from these trembling hands
Cast incense thereon, and upon them lay
These shafts, the relics of a happier day,
Then watch with me ; perchance I may not die,
Though the supremest hour now draws anigh
Of life or death—O thou who madest me,
The only thing on earth alike to thee,
Why must I be unlike to thee in this ?
Consider, if thou dost not do amiss
To slay the only thing that feareth death
Or knows its name, of all things drawing breath
Upon the earth : see now for no short hour,
For no half-halting death, to reach me slower
Than other men, I pray thee—what avail
To add some trickling grains unto the tale
Soon told, of minutes thou dost snatch away

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

From out the midst of that unending day
Wherein thou dwellest? rather grant me this
To right me wherein thou hast done amiss,
And give me life like thine for evermore."

So murmured he, contending very sore
Against the coming death; but she meanwhile
Faint with consuming love, made haste to pile
The brands upon the hearth, and thereon cast
Sweet incense, and the feathered shafts at last;
Then, trembling, back unto the bed she crept,
And lay down by his side, and no more wept,
Nay scarce could think of death for very love
That in her faithful heart for ever strove
'Gainst fear and grief: but now the incense-cloud
The old familiar chamber did enshroud,
And on the very verge of death drawn close
Wrapt both their weary souls in strange repose,
That through sweet sleep sent kindly images
Of simple things; and in the midst of these,
Whether it were but parcel of their dream,
Or that they woke to it as some might deem,
I know not, but the door was opened wide,
And the King's name a voice long silent cried,
And Phœbus on the very threshold trod,
And yet in nothing liker to a god
Than when he ruled Admetus' herds, for he
Still wore the homespun coat men used to see
Among the heifers in the summer morn,
And round about him hung the herdsman's horn,
And in his hand he bore the herdsman's spear

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And cornel bow, the prowling dog-wolf's fear,
Though empty of its shafts the quiver was.

He to the middle of the room did pass,
And said, "Admetus, neither all for nought
My coming to thee is, nor have I brought
Good tidings to thee; poor man, thou shalt live
If any soul for thee sweet life will give
Enforced by none: for such a sacrifice
Alone the Fates can deem a fitting price
For thy redemption; in no battle-field,
Maddened by hope of glory life to yield,
To give it up to heal no city's shame
In hope of gaining long-enduring fame;
For whoso dieth for thee must believe
That thou with shame that last gift wilt receive,
And strive henceforward with forgetfulness
The honied draught of thy new life to bless.
Nay, and moreover such a glorious heart
Who loves thee well enough with life to part
But for thy love, with life must lose love too,
Which e'en when wrapped about in weeds of woe
Is godlike life indeed to such an one.

"And now behold, three days ere life is done
Do the Fates give thee, and I, even I,
Upon thy life have shed felicity
And given thee love of men, that they in turn
With fervent love of thy dear love might burn.
The people love thee and thy silk-clad breast,
Thine open doors have given thee better rest
Than woods of spears or hills of walls might do.
And even now in wakefulness and woe

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

The city lies, calling to mind thy love,
Wearying with ceaseless prayers the gods above.
But thou—thine heart is wise enough to know
That they no whit from their decrees will go."

So saying, swiftly from the room he passed ;
But on the world no look Admetus cast,
But peacefully turned round unto the wall
As one who knows that quick death must befall :
For in his heart he thought, " Indeed too well
I know what men are, this strange tale to tell
To those that live with me : yea, they will weep,
And o'er my tomb most solemn days will keep,
And in great chronicles will write my name,
Telling to many an age my deeds and fame.
For living men such things as this desire,
And by such ways will they appease the fire
Of love and grief : but when death comes to stare
Full in men's faces, and the truth lays bare,
How can we then have wish for anything,
But unto life that gives us all to cling ? "

So said he, and with closed eyes did await,
Sleeping or waking, the decrees of fate.

But now Alcestis rose, and by the bed
She stood, with wild thoughts passing through her head.
Dried were her tears, her troubled heart and sore
Throbbled with the anguish of her love no more.
A strange look on the dying man she cast,
Then covered up her face and said, " O past !
Past the sweet times that I remember well !

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Alas, that such a tale my heart can tell!
Ah, how I trusted him! what love was mine!
How sweet to feel his arms about me twine,
And my heart beat with his! what wealth of bliss
To hear his praises! all to come to this,
That now I durst not look upon his face,
Lest in my heart that other thing have place,
That which I knew not, that which men call hate.

“O me, the bitterness of God and fate!
A little time ago we two were one;
I had not lost him though his life was done,
For still was he in me—but now alone
Through the thick darkness must my soul make moan,
For I must die: how can I live to bear
An empty heart about, the nurse of fear?
How can I live to die some other tide,
And, dying, hear my loveless name outcried
About the portals of that weary land
Whereby my shadowy feet should come to stand.

“Alcestis! O Alcestis, hadst thou known
That thou one day shouldst thus be left alone,
How hadst thou borne a living soul to love!
Hadst thou not rather lifted hands to Jove,
To turn thine heart to stone, thy front to brass,
That through this wondrous world thy soul might pass,
Well pleased and careless, as Diana goes
Through the thick woods, all pitiless of those
Her shafts smite down? Alas! how could it be?
Can a god give a god's delights to thee?
Nay rather, Jove, but give me once again,
If for one moment only, that sweet pain,

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

The love I had while still I thought to live!
Ah! wilt thou not, since unto thee I give
My life, my hope?—But thou—I come to thee.
Thou sleepest: O wake not, nor speak to me!
In silence let my last hour pass away,
And men forget my bitter feeble day.”

With that she laid her down upon the bed,
And nestling to him, kissed his weary head,
And laid his wasted hand upon her breast,
Yet woke him not; and silence and deep rest
Fell on that chamber. The night wore away
Mid gusts of wailing wind, the twilight grey
Stole o’er the sea, and wrought his wondrous change
On things unseen by night, by day not strange,
But now half seen and strange; then came the sun,
And therewithal the silent world and dun
Waking, waxed many-coloured, full of sound,
As men again their heap of troubles found,
And woke up to their joy or misery.

But there, unmoved by aught, those twain did lie,
Until Admetus’ ancient nurse drew near
Unto the open door, and full of fear
Beheld them moving not, and as folk dead;
Then, trembling with her eagerness and dread,
She cried, “Admetus! art thou dead indeed?
Alcestis! livest thou my words to heed?
Alas, alas, for this Thessalian folk!”

But with her piercing cry the King awoke,
And round about him wildly ’gan to stare,
As a bewildered man who knows not where

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

He has awakened : but not thin or wan
His face was now, as of a dying man,
But fresh and ruddy ; and his eyes shone clear,
As of a man who much of life may bear.
And at the first, but joy and great surprise
Shone out from those awakened, new-healed eyes ;
But as for something more at last he yearned,
Unto his love with troubled brow he turned,
For still she seemed to sleep : alas, alas !
Her lonely shadow even now did pass
Along the changeless fields, oft looking back,
As though it yet had thought of some great lack.
And here, the hand just fallen from off his breast
Was cold ; and cold the bosom his hand pressed.
And even as the colour lit the day
The colour from her lips had waned away ;
Yet still, as though that longed-for happiness
Had come again her faithful heart to bless,
Those white lips smiled, unwrinkled was her brow,
But of her eyes no secrets might he know,
For, hidden by the lids of ivory,
Had they beheld that death a-drawing nigh.

Then o'er her dead corpse King Admetus hung,
Such sorrow in his heart as his faint tongue
Refused to utter ; yet the just-past night
But dimly he remembered, and the sight
Of the Far-darter, and the dreadful word
That seemed to cleave all hope as with a sword :
Yet stronger in his heart a knowledge grew,
That nought it was but her fond heart and true

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

That all the marvel for his love had wrought,
Whereby from death to life he had been brought ;
That dead, his life she was, as she had been
His life's delight while still she lived a queen.
And he fell wondering if his life were gain,
So wrapt as then in loneliness and pain ;
Yet therewithal no tears would fill his eyes,
For as a god he was.

Then did he rise
And gat him down unto the Council-place,
And when the people saw his well-loved face
They cried aloud for joy to see him there,
And earth again to them seemed blest and fair.
And though indeed they did lament in turn,
When of Alcestis' end they came to learn,
Scarce was it more than seeming, or, at least,
The silence in the middle of a feast,
When men have memory of their heroes slain.
So passed the order of the world again,
Victorious Summer crowning lusty Spring,
Rich Autumn faint with wealth of harvesting,
And Winter the earth's sleep ; and then again
Spring, Summer, Autumn, and the Winter's pain ;
And still and still the same the years went by.

But Time, who slays so many a memory,
Brought hers to light, the short-lived loving Queen ;
And her fair soul, as scent of flowers unseen,
Sweetened the turmoil of long centuries.
For soon, indeed, Death laid his hand on these,
The shouters round the throne upon that day,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And for Admetus, he, too, went his way,
Though if he died at all I cannot tell ;
But either on the earth he ceased to dwell,
Or else, oft born again, had many a name.
But through all lands of Greece Alcestis' fame
Grew greater, and about her husband's twined
Lived, in the hearts of far-off men enshrined.
See I have told her tale, though I know not
What men are dwelling now on that green spot
Anigh Bœbeis, or if Pheræ still,
With name oft changed perchance, adown the hill
Still shows its white walls to the rising sun.
—The gods at least remember what is done.

JUNE

STRANGE felt the wanderers at his tale, for now
Their old desires it seemed once more to show
Unto their altered hearts, when now the rest,
Most surely coming, of all things seemed best ;—
—Unless, by death perchance they yet might gain
Some space to try such deeds as now in vain
They heard of amidst stories of the past ;
Such deeds as they for that wild hope had cast
From out their hands—they sighed to think of it,
And how as deedless men they there must sit.

Yet, with the measured falling of that rhyme
Mingled the lovely sights and glorious time,
Whereby, in spite of hope long past away,
In spite of knowledge growing day by day
Of lives so wasted, in despite of death,
With sweet content that eve they drew their breath,
And scarce their own lives seemed to touch them more
Than that dead Queen's beside Bœbeis' shore ;
Bitter and sweet so mingled in them both,
Their lives and that old tale, they had been loth,
Perchance, to have them told another way.—
So passed the sun from that fair summer day.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

JUNE drew unto its end, the hot bright days
Now gat from men as much of blame as praise,
As rainless still they passed, without a cloud,
And growing grey at last, the barley bowed
Before the south-east wind. On such a day
These folk amid the trellised roses lay,
And careless for a little while at least,
Crowned with the mingled blossoms held their feast :
Nor did the garden lack for younger folk,
Who cared no more for burning summer's yoke
Than the sweet breezes of the April-tide ;
But through the thick trees wandered far and wide
From sun to shade, and shade to sun again,
Until they deemed the elders would be fain
To hear the tale, and shadows longer grew :
Then round about the grave old men they drew,
Both youths and maidens ; and beneath their feet
The grass seemed greener, and the flowers more sweet
Unto the elders, as they stood around.

So through the calm air soon arose the sound
Of one old voice as now a Wanderer spoke.
"O friends, and ye, fair loving gentle folk,
Would I could better tell a tale to-day ;
But hark to this, which while our good ship lay

JUNE

Within the Weser such a while ago,
A Fleming told me, as we sat alone
One Sunday evening in the Rose-garland,
And all the other folk were gone a-land
After their pleasure, like sea-faring men.
Surely I deem it no great wonder then
That I remember everything he said,
Since from that Sunday eve strange fortune led
That keel and me on such a weary way—
Well, at the least it serveth you to-day.”

THE LADY OF THE LAND

ARGUMENT

A CERTAIN man having landed on an island in the Greek Sea, found there a beautiful damsel, whom he would fain have delivered from a strange and dreadful doom, but failing herein, he died soon afterwards.

IT happened once, some men of Italy
Midst the Greek Islands went a sea-roving,
And much good fortune had they on the sea :
Of many a man they had the ransoming,
And many a chain they gat, and goodly thing ;
And midst their voyage to an isle they came,
Whereof my story keepeth not the name.

Now though but little was there left to gain,
Because the richer folk had gone away,
Yet since by this of water they were fain
They came to anchor in a land-locked bay,
Whence in a while some went ashore to play,
Going but lightly armed in twos or threes,
For midst that folk they feared no enemies.

And of these fellows that thus went ashore,
One was there who left all his friends behind ;
Who going inland ever more and more,

THE LADY OF THE LAND

And being left quite alone, at last did find
A lonely valley sheltered from the wind,
Wherein, amidst an ancient cypress wood,
A long-deserted ruined castle stood.

The wood, once ordered in fair grove and glade,
With gardens overlooked by terraces,
And marble-paved pools for pleasure made,
Was tangled now, and choked with fallen trees ;
And he who went there, with but little ease
Must stumble by the stream's side, once made meet
For tender women's dainty wandering feet.

The raven's croak, the low wind choked and drear,
The baffled stream, the grey wolf's doleful cry,
Were all the sounds that mariner could hear,
As through the wood he wandered painfully ;
But as unto the house he drew anigh,
The pillars of a ruined shrine he saw,
The once fair temple of a fallen law.

No image was there left behind to tell
Before whose face the knees of men had bowed ;
An altar of black stone, of old wrought well,
Alone beneath a ruined roof now showed
The goal whereto the folk were wont to crowd,
Seeking for things forgotten long ago,
Praying for heads long ages laid a-low.

Close to the temple was the castle-gate,
Doorless and crumbling ; there our fellow turned,
Trembling indeed at what might chance to wait

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

The prey entrapped, yet with a heart that burned
To know the most of what might there be learned,
And hoping somewhat too, amid his fear,
To light on such things as all men hold dear.

Noble the house was, nor seemed built for war,
But rather like the work of other days,
When men, in better peace than now they are,
Had leisure on the world around to gaze,
And noted well the past times' changing ways;
And fair with sculptured stories it was wrought,
By lapse of time unto dim ruin brought.

Now as he looked about on all these things,
And strove to read the mouldering histories,
Above the door an image with wide wings,
Whose unclad limbs a serpent seemed to seize,
He dimly saw, although the western breeze,
And years of biting frost and washing rain,
Had made the carver's labour well-nigh vain.

But this, though perished sore, and worn away,
He noted well, because it seemed to be,
After the fashion of another day,
Some great man's badge of war, or armoury,
And round it a carved wreath he seemed to see :
But taking note of these things, at the last
The mariner beneath the gateway passed.

And there a lovely cloistered court he found,
A fountain in the midst o'erthrown and dry,
And in the cloister briers twining round

THE LADY OF THE LAND

The slender shafts ; the wondrous imagery
Outworn by more than many years gone by,
Because the country people, in their fear
Of wizardry, had wrought destruction here ;

And piteously these fair things had been maimed ;
There stood great Jove, lacking his head of might ;
Here was the archer, swift Apollo, lamed ;
The shapely limbs of Venus hid from sight
By weeds and shards ; Diana's ankles light
Bound with the cable of some coasting ship ;
And rusty nails through Helen's maddening lip.

Therefrom unto the chambers did he pass,
And found them fair still, midst of their decay,
Though in them now no sign of man there was,
And everything but stone had passed away
That made them lovely in that vanished day ;
Nay, the mere walls themselves would soon be gone
And nought be left but heaps of mouldering stone.

But he, when all the place he had gone o'er,
And with much trouble clomb the broken stair,
And from the topmost turret seen the shore
And his good ship drawn up at anchor there,
Came down again, and found a crypt most fair
Built wonderfully beneath the greatest hall,
And there he saw a door within the wall,

Well-hinged, close shut ; nor was there in that place
Another on its hinges, therefore he
Stood there and pondered for a little space,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And thought, "Perchance some marvel I shall see,
For surely here some dweller there must be,
Because this door seems whole, and new, and sound,
While nought but ruin I can see around."

So with that word, moved by a strong desire,
He tried the hasp, that yielded to his hand,
And in a strange place, lit as by a fire
Unseen but near, he presently did stand ;
And by an odorous breeze his face was fanned,
As though in some Arabian plain he stood,
Anigh the border of a spice-tree wood.¹

He moved not for awhile, but looking round,
He wondered much to see the place so fair,
Because, unlike the castle above ground,
No pillager or wrecker had been there ;
It seemed that time had passed on elsewhere,
Nor laid a finger on this hidden place,
Rich with the wealth of some forgotten race.

With hangings, fresh as when they left the loom,
The walls were hung a space above the head,
Slim ivory chairs were set about the room,
And in one corner was a dainty bed,
That seemed for some fair queen apparelléd ;
And marble was the worst stone of the floor,
That with rich Indian webs was covered o'er.

The wanderer trembled when he saw all this,
Because he deemed by magic it was wrought ;
Yet in his heart a longing for some bliss,

THE LADY OF THE LAND

Whereof the hard and changing world knows nought,
Arose and urged him on, and dimmed the thought
That there perchance some devil lurked to slay
The heedless wanderer from the light of day.

Over against him was another door
Set in the wall, so, casting fear aside,
With hurried steps he crossed the varied floor,
And there again the silver latch he tried
And with no pain the door he opened wide,
And entering the new chamber cautiously
The glory of great heaps of gold could see.

Upon the floor uncounted medals lay,
Like things of little value ; here and there
Stood golden caldrons, that might well outweigh
The biggest midst an emperor's copper-ware,
And golden cups were set on tables fair,
Themselves of gold ; and in all hollow things
Were stored great gems, worthy the crowns of kings.

The walls and roof with gold were overlaid,
And precious raiment from the wall hung down ;
The fall of kings that treasure might have stayed,
Or gained some longing conqueror great renown,
Or built again some god-destroyed old town ;
What wonder, if this plunderer of the sea
Stood gazing at it long and dizzily ?

But at the last his troubled eyes and dazed
He lifted from the glory of that gold,
And then the image, that well-nigh erased

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Over the castle-gate he did behold,
Above a door well wrought in coloured gold
Again he saw ; a naked girl with wings
Enfolded in a serpent's scaly rings.

And even as his eyes were fixed on it
A woman's voice came from the other side,
And through his heart strange hopes began to flit
That in some wondrous land he might abide
Not dying, master of a deathless bride,
So o'er the gold which now he scarce could see
He went, and passed this last door eagerly.

Then in a room he stood wherein there was
A marble bath, whose brimming water yet
Was scarcely still ; a vessel of green glass
Half full of odorous ointment was there set
Upon the topmost step that still was wet,
And jewelled shoes and women's dainty gear,
Lay cast upon the varied pavement near.

In one quick glance these things his eyes did see,
But speedily they turned round to behold
Another sight, for throned on ivory
There sat a woman, whose wet tresses rolled
On to the floor in waves of gleaming gold,
Cast back from such a form as, erewhile shown
To one poor shepherd, lighted up Troy town.

Naked she was, the kisses of her feet
Upon the floor a dying path had made
From the full bath unto her ivory seat ;

THE LADY OF THE LAND

In her right hand, upon her bosom laid,
She held a golden comb, a mirror weighed
Her left hand down, aback her fair head lay
Dreaming awake of some long-vanished day.

Her eyes were shut, but she seemed not to sleep,
Her lips were murmuring things unheard and low,
Or sometimes twitched as though she needs must weep
Though from her eyes the tears refused to flow,
And oft with heavenly red her cheek did glow,
As if remembrance of some half-sweet shame
Across the web of many memories came.

There stood the man, scarce daring to draw breath
For fear the lovely sight should fade away ;
Forgetting heaven, forgetting life and death,
Trembling for fear lest something he should say
Unwitting, lest some sob should yet betray
His presence there, for to his eager eyes
Already did the tears begin to rise.

But as he gazed she moved, and with a sigh
Bent forward, dropping down her golden head ;
“ Alas, alas ! another day gone by,
Another day and no soul come,” she said ;
“ Another year, and still I am not dead ! ”
And with that word once more her head she raised,
And on the trembling man with great eyes gazed.

Then he imploring hands to her did reach,
And toward her very slowly 'gan to move
And with wet eyes her pity did beseech,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And seeing her about to speak he strove
From trembling lips to utter words of love ;
But with a look she stayed his doubtful feet,
And made sweet music as their eyes did meet.

For now she spoke in gentle voice and clear,
Using the Greek tongue that he knew full well ;
“ What man art thou, that thus hast wandered here,
And found this lonely chamber where I dwell ?
Beware, beware ! for I have many a spell ;
If greed of power and gold have led thee on,
Not lightly shall this untold wealth be won.

“ But if thou com'st here, knowing of my tale,
In hope to bear away my body fair,
Stout must thine heart be, nor shall that avail
If thou a wicked soul in thee dost bear ;
So once again I bid thee to beware,
Because no base man things like this may see,
And live thereafter long and happily.”

“ Lady,” he said, “ in Florence is my home,
And in my city noble is my name ;
Neither on peddling voyage am I come,
But, like my fathers, bent to gather fame ;
And though thy face has set my heart a-flame
Yet of thy story nothing do I know,
But here have wandered heedlessly enow.

“ But since the sight of thee mine eyes did bless,
What can I be but thine ? what wouldst thou have ?
From those thy words, I deem from some distress

THE LADY OF THE LAND

By deeds of mine thy dear life I might save ;
O then, delay not ! if one ever gave
His life to any, mine I give to thee ;
Come, tell me what the price of love must be ?

“Swift death, to be with thee a day and night
And with the earliest dawning to be slain ?
Or better, a long year of great delight,
And many years of misery and pain ?
Or worse, and this poor hour for all my gain ?
A sorry merchant am I on this day,
E'en as thou willest so must I obey.”

She said, “What brave words ! nought divine am I,
But an unhappy and unheard-of maid
Compelled by evil fate and destiny
To live, who long ago should have been laid
Under the earth within the cypress shade.
Hearken awhile, and quickly shalt thou know
What deed I pray thee to accomplish now.

“God grant indeed thy words are not for nought !
Then shalt thou save me, since for many a day
To such a dreadful life I have been brought :
Nor will I spare with all my heart to pay
What man soever takes my grief away ;
Ah ! I will love thee, if thou lovest me
But well enough my saviour now to be.

“My father lived a many years ago
Lord of this land, master of all cunning,
Who ruddy gold could draw from out grey stone,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And gather wealth from many an uncouth thing,
He made the wilderness rejoice and sing,
And such a leech he was that none could say
Without his word what soul should pass away.

“Unto Diana such a gift he gave,
Goddess above, below, and on the earth,
That I should be her virgin and her slave
From the first hour of my most wretched birth ;
Therefore my life had known but little mirth
When I had come unto my twentieth year
And the last time of hallowing drew anear.

“So in her temple had I lived and died
And all would long ago have passed away,
But ere that time came, did strange things betide,
Whereby I am alive unto this day ;
Alas, the bitter words that I must say !
Ah ! can I bring my wretched tongue to tell
How I was brought unto this fearful hell.

“A queen I was, what gods I knew I loved,
And nothing evil was there in my thought,
And yet by love my wretched heart was moved
Until to utter ruin I was brought !
Alas ! thou sayest our gods were vain and nought,
Wait, wait, till thou hast heard this tale of mine,
Then shalt thou think them devilish or divine.

“Hearken ! in spite of father and of vow
I loved a man ; but for that sin I think
Men had forgiven me—yea, yea, even thou ;

THE LADY OF THE LAND

But from the gods the full cup must I drink,
And into misery unheard of sink,
Tormented when their own names are forgot,
And men must doubt e'er if they lived or not.

“Glorious my lover was unto my sight,
Most beautiful,—of love we grew so fain
That we at last agreed, that on a night
We should be happy, but that he were slain
Or shut in hold, and neither joy nor pain
Should else forbid that hoped-for time to be;
So came the night that made a wretch of me.

“Ah! well do I remember all that night,
When through the window shone the orb of June,
And by the bed flickered the taper's light,
Whereby I trembled, gazing at the moon:
Ah me! the meeting that we had, when soon
Into his strong, well-trusted arms I fell,
And many a sorrow we began to tell.

“Ah me! what parting on that night we had!
I think the story of my great despair
A little while might merry folk make sad;
For, as he swept away my yellow hair
To make my shoulder and my bosom bare,
I raised mine eyes, and shuddering could behold
A shadow cast upon the bed of gold:

“Then suddenly was quenched my hot desire
And he untwined his arms; the moon so pale
A while ago, seemed changed to blood and fire,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And yet my limbs beneath me did not fail,
And neither had I strength to cry or wail,
But stood there helpless, bare, and shivering,
With staring eyes still fixed upon the thing.

“Because the shade that on the bed of gold
The changed and dreadful moon was throwing down
Was of Diana, whom I did behold,
With knotted hair, and shining girt-up gown,
And on the high white brow, a deadly frown
Bent upon us, who stood scarce drawing breath,
Striving to meet the horrible sure death.

“No word at all the dreadful goddess said,
But soon across my feet my lover lay,
And well indeed I knew that he was dead ;
And would that I had died on that same day !
For in a while the image turned away,
And without words my doom I understood,
And felt a horror change my human blood.

“And there I fell, and on the floor I lay
By the dead man, till daylight came on me,
And not a word thenceforward could I say
For three years, till of grief and misery,
The lingering pest, the cruel enemy,
My father and his folk were dead and gone,
And in this castle I was left alone :

“And then the doom foreseen upon me fell,
For Queen Diana did my body change
Into a fork-tongued dragon flesh and fell,

THE LADY OF THE LAND

And through the island nightly do I range,
Or in the green sea mate with monsters strange,
When in the middle of the moonlit night
The sleepy mariner I do affright.

“But all day long upon this gold I lie
Within this place, where never mason’s hand
Smote trowel on the marble noisily;
Drowsy I lie, no folk at my command,
Who once was called the Lady of the Land;
Who might have bought a kingdom with a kiss,
Yea, half the world with such a sight as this.”

And therewithal, with rosy fingers light,
Backward her heavy-hanging hair she threw,
To give her naked beauty more to sight;
But when, forgetting all the things he knew,
Maddened with love unto the prize he drew,
She cried, “Nay, wait! for wherefore wilt thou die,
Why should we not be happy, thou and I?”

“Wilt thou not save me? once in every year
This rightful form of mine that thou dost see
By favour of the goddess have I here
From sunrise unto sunset given me,
That some brave man may end my misery.
And thou—art thou not brave? can thy heart fail,
Whose eyes e’en now are weeping at my tale?”

“Then listen! when this day is overpast,
A fearful monster shall I be again,
And thou mayst be my saviour at the last,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Unless, once more, thy words are nought and vain ;
If thou of love and sovereignty art fain,
Come thou next morn, and when thou seest here
A hideous dragon, have thereof no fear,

“ But take the loathsome head up in thine hands,
And kiss it, and be master presently
Of twice the wealth that is in all the lands,
From Cathay to the head of Italy ;
And master also, if it pleaseth thee,
Of all thou praisest as so fresh and bright,
Of what thou callest crown of all delight.

“ Ah ! with what joy then shall I see again
The sunlight on the green grass and the trees,
And hear the clatter of the summer rain,
And see the joyous folk beyond the seas.
Ah, me ! to hold my child upon my knees,
After the weeping of unkindly tears,
And all the wrongs of these four hundred years.

“ Go now, go quick ! leave this grey heap of stone ;
And from thy glad heart think upon thy way,
How I shall love thee—yea, love thee alone,
That bringest me from dark death unto day ;
For this shall be thy wages and thy pay ;
Unheard-of wealth, unheard-of love is near,
If thou hast heart a little dread to bear.”

Therewith she turned to go ; but he cried out,
“ Ah ! wilt thou leave me then without one kiss,
To slay the very seeds of fear and doubt,

THE LADY OF THE LAND

That glad to-morrow may bring certain bliss?
Hast thou forgotten how love lives by this,
The memory of some hopeful close embrace,
Low whispered words within some lonely place?"

But she, when his bright glittering eyes she saw,
And burning cheeks, cried out, "Alas, alas!
Must I be quite undone, and wilt thou draw
A worse fate on me than the first one was?
O haste thee from this fatal place to pass!
Yet, ere thou goest, take this, lest thou shouldst deem
Thou hast been fooled by some strange midday dream.'

So saying, blushing like a new-kissed maid,
From off her neck a little gem she drew,
That, 'twixt those snowy rose-tinged hillocks laid,
The secrets of her glorious beauty knew;
And ere he well perceived what she would do,
She touched his hand, the gem within it lay,
And, turning, from his sight she fled away.

Then at the doorway where her rosy heel
Had glanced and vanished, he awhile did stare,
And still upon his hand he seemed to feel
The varying kisses of her fingers fair;
Then turned he toward the dreary crypt and bare,
And dizzily throughout the castle passed,
Till by the ruined fane he stood at last.

Then weighing still the gem within his hand,
He stumbled backward through the cypress wood,
Thinking the while of some strange lovely land,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Where all his life should be most fair and good ;
Till on the valley's wall of hills he stood,
And slowly thence passed down unto the bay
Red with the death of that bewildering day.

THE next day came, and he, who all the night
Had ceaselessly been turning in his bed,
Arose and clad himself in armour bright,
And many a danger he remembered ;
Storming of towns, lone sieges full of dread,
That with renown his heart had borne him through,
And this thing seemed a little thing to do.

So on he went, and on the way he thought
Of all the glorious things of yesterday,
Nought of the price whereat they must be bought,
But ever to himself did softly say,
“ No roaming now, my wars are passed away,
No long dull days devoid of happiness,
When such a love my yearning heart shall bless.”

Thus to the castle did he come at last,
But when unto the gateway he drew near,
And underneath its ruined archway passed
Into the court, a strange noise did he hear,
And through his heart there shot a pang of fear ;
Trembling, he gat his sword into his hand,
And midmost of the cloisters took his stand.

THE LADY OF THE LAND

But for a while that unknown noise increased,
A rattling, that with strident roars did blend,
And whining moans; but suddenly it ceased,
A fearful thing stood at the cloister's end,
And eyed him for a while, then 'gan to wend
Adown the cloisters, and began again
That rattling, and the moan like fiends in pain.

And as it came on towards him, with its teeth
The body of a slain goat did it tear,
The blood whereof in its hot jaws did seethe,
And on its tongue he saw the smoking hair;
Then his heart sank, and standing trembling there,
Throughout his mind wild thoughts and fearful ran,
"Some fiend she was," he said, "the bane of man."

Yet he abode her still, although his blood
Curdled within him: the thing dropped the goat,
And creeping on, came close to where he stood,
And raised its head to him, and wrinkled throat.
Then he cried out and wildly at her smote,
Shutting his eyes, and turned and from the place
Ran swiftly, with a white and ghastly face.

But little things rough stones and tree-trunks seemed,
And if he fell, he rose and ran on still;
No more he felt his hurts than if he dreamed,
He made no stay for valley or steep hill,
Heedless he dashed through many a foaming rill,
Until he came unto the ship at last
And with no word into the deep hold passed.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Meanwhile the dragon, seeing him clean gone,
Followed him not, but crying horribly,
Caught up within her jaws a block of stone
And ground it into powder, then turned she,
With cries that folk could hear far out at sea,
And reached the treasure set apart of old,
To brood above the hidden heaps of gold.

Yet was she seen again on many a day
By some half-waking mariner, or herd,
Playing amid the ripples of the bay,
Or on the hills making all things afeard,
Or in the wood, that did that castle gird,
But never any man again durst go
To seek her woman's form, and end her woe.

As for the man, who knows what things he bore!
What mournful faces peopled the sad night,
What wailings vexed him with reproaches sore,
What images of that nigh-gained delight!
What dreamed caresses from soft hands and white,
Turning to horrors ere they reached the best,
What struggles vain, what shame, what huge unrest?

No man he knew, three days he lay and raved,
And cried for death, until a lethargy
Fell on him, and his fellows thought him saved;
But on the third night he awoke to die;
And at Byzantium doth his body lie
Between two blossoming pomegranate trees,
Within the churchyard of the Genoese.

JUNE

A MOMENT'S silence as his tale had end,
And then the wind of that June night did blend
Their varied voices, as of that and this
They fell to talk : of those fair islands' bliss
They knew in other days, of hope they had
To live there long an easy life and glad,
With nought to vex them ; and the younger men
Began to nourish strange dreams even then
Of sailing east, as these had once sailed west ;
Because the story of that luckless quest
With hope, not fear, had filled their joyous hearts,
And made them dream of new and noble parts
That they might act ; of raising up the name
Their fathers bore, and winning boundless fame.

These too with little patience seemed to hear,
That story end with shame and grief and fear ;
A little thing the man had had to do,
They said, if longing burned within him so.
But at their words the older men must bow
Their heads, and, smiling, somewhat thoughtful grow,
Remembering well how fear in days gone by
Had dealt with them, and poisoned wretchedly
Good days, good deeds, and longings for all good :
Yet on the evil times they would not brood,
But sighing, strove to raise the weight of years,
And no more memory of their hopes and fears
They nourished, but such gentle thoughts as fed
The pensiveness which that sweet season bred.

JULY

FAIR was the morn to-day, the blossom's scent
Floated across the fresh grass, and the bees
With low vexed song from rose to lily went,
A gentle wind was in the heavy trees,
And thine eyes shone with joyous memories ;
Fair was the early morn, and fair wert thou,
And I was happy—Ah, be happy now !

Peace and content without us, love within
That hour there was, now thunder and wild rain
Have wrapped the cowering world, and foolish sin,
And nameless pride, have made us wise in vain ;
Ah, love ! although the morn shall come again,
And on new rose-buds the new sun shall smile,
Can we regain what we have lost meanwhile ?

E'en now the west grows clear of storm and threat,
But midst the lightning did the fair sun die—
—Ah, he shall rise again for ages yet,
He cannot waste his life—but thou and I—
Who knows if next morn this felicity
My lips may feel, or if thou still shalt live
This seal of love renewed once more to give ?

JULY

WITHIN a lovely valley, watered well
With flowery streams, the July feast befell,
And there within the Chief-priest's fair abode
They cast aside their trouble's heavy load,
Scarce made aweary by the sultry day.
The earth no longer laboured ; shaded lay
The sweet-breathed kine, across the sunny vale,
From hill to hill the wandering rook did sail,
Lazily croaking, midst his dreams of spring,
Nor more awake the pink-foot dove did cling
Unto the beech-bough, murmuring now and then ;
All rested but the restless sons of men
And the great sun that wrought this happiness,
And all the vale with fruitful hopes did bless.

So in a marble chamber bright with flowers,
The old men feasted through the fresher hours,
And at the hottest time of all the day
When now the sun was on his downward way,
Sat listening to a tale an elder told,
New to his fathers while they yet did hold
The cities of some far-off Grecian isle,
Though in the heavens the cloud of force and guile
Was gathering dark that sent them o'er the sea
To win new lands for their posterity.

THE SON OF CRÆSUS

ARGUMENT

CRÆSUS, King of Lydia, dreamed that he saw his son slain by an iron weapon, and though by every means he strove to avert this doom from him, yet thus it happened, for his son was slain by the hand of the man who seemed least of all likely to do the deed.

OF Cræsus tells my tale, a king of old
In Lydia, ere the Mede fell on the land,
A man made mighty by great heaps of gold,
Feared for the myriads strong of heart and hand
That 'neath his banners wrought out his command,
And though his latter ending happed on ill,
Yet first of every joy he had his fill.

Two sons he had, and one was dumb from birth;
The other one, that Atys had to name,
Grew up a fair youth, and of might and worth,
And well it seemed the race wherefrom he came
From him should never get reproach or shame:
But yet no stroke he struck before his death,
In no war-shout he spent his latest breath.

Now Cræsus, lying on his bed a night,
Dreamed that he saw this dear son laid a-low,
And folk lamenting he was slain outright,

THE SON OF CROÆSUS

And that some iron thing had dealt the blow;
By whose hand guided he could nowise know,
Or if in peace by traitors it were done,
Or in some open war not yet begun.

Three times one night this vision broke his sleep,
So that at last he rose up from his bed,
That he might ponder how he best might keep
The threatened danger from so dear a head;
And, since he now was old enough to wed,
The King sent men to search the lands around,
Until some matchless maiden should be found;

That in her arms this Atys might forget
The praise of men, and fame of history,
Whereby full many a field has been made wet
With blood of men, and many a deep green sea
Been reddened therewithal, and yet shall be;
That her sweet voice might drown the people's praise,
Her eyes make bright the uneventful days.

So when at last a wonder they had brought,
From some sweet land down by the ocean's rim,
Than whom no fairer could by man be thought,
And ancient dames, scanning her limb by limb,
Had said that she was fair enough for him,
To her was Atys married with much show,
And looked to dwell with her in bliss enow.

And in meantime afield he never went,
Either to hunting or the frontier war,
No dart was cast, nor any engine bent

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Anigh him, and the Lydian men afar
Must rein their steeds, and the bright blossoms mar
If they have any lust of tourney now,
And in far meadows must they bend the bow.

And also through the palace everywhere
The swords and spears were taken from the wall
That long with honour had been hanging there,
And from the golden pillars of the hall ;
Lest by mischance some sacred blade should fall,
And in its falling bring revenge at last
For many a fatal battle overpast.

And every day King Cræsus wrought with care
To save his dear son from that threatened end,
And many a beast he offered up with prayer
Unto the gods, and much of wealth did spend,
That they so prayed might yet perchance defend
That life, until at least that he were dead,
With earth laid heavy on his unseeing head.

But in the midst even of the wedding feast
There came a man, who by the golden hall
Sat down upon the steps, and man or beast
He heeded not, but there against the wall
He leaned his head, speaking no word at all,
Till, with his son and son's wife, came the King,
And then unto his gown the man did cling.

"What man art thou?" the King said to him then,
"That in such guise thou prayest on thy knee ;
Hast thou some fell foe here among my men ?

THE SON OF CROESUS

Or hast thou done an ill deed unto me?
Or has thy wife been carried over sea?
Or hast thou on this day great need of gold?
Or say, why else thou now art grown so bold."

"O King," he said, "I ask no gold to-day,
And though indeed thy greatness drew me here,
No wrong have I that thou couldst wipe away;
And nought of mine the pirate folk did bear
Across the sea; none of thy folk I fear:
But all the gods are now mine enemies,
Therefore I kneel before thee on my knees.

"For as with mine own brother on a day
Within the running place at home I played,
Unwittingly I smote him such-a-way
That dead upon the green grass he was laid;
Half-dead myself I fled away dismayed,
Wherefore I pray thee help me in my need,
And purify my soul of this sad deed.

"If of my name and country thou wouldst know,
In Phrygia yet my father is a king,
Gordius, the son of Midas, rich enow
In corn and cattle, golden cup and ring;
And mine own name before I did this thing
Was called Adrastus, whom, in street and hall,
The slayer of his brother men now call."

"Friend," said the King, "have thou no fear of me;
For though, indeed, I am right happy now,
Yet well I know this may not always be,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And I may chance some day to kneel full low,
And to some happy man mine head to bow
With prayers to do a greater thing than this.
Dwell thou with us, and win again thy bliss.

“For in this city men in sport and play
Forget the trouble that the gods have sent ;
Who therewithal send wine, and many a may
As fair as she for whom the Trojan went,
And many a dear delight besides have lent,
Which, whoso is well loved of them shall keep
Till in forgetful death he falls asleep.

“Therefore to-morrow shall those rites be done
That kindred blood demands that thou hast shed,
That if the mouth of thine own mother’s son
Did hap to curse thee ere he was quite dead,
The curse may lie the lighter on thine head,
Because the flower-crowned head of many a beast
Has fallen voiceless in our glorious feast.”

Then did Adrastus rise and thank the King,
And the next day when yet low was the sun,
The sacrifice and every other thing
That unto these dread rites belonged, was done ;
And there Adrastus dwelt, hated of none,
And loved of many, and the King loved him,
For brave and wise he was and strong of limb.

But chiefly amongst all did Atys love
The luckless stranger, whose fair tales of war
The Lydian’s heart abundantly did move,

THE SON OF CRÆSUS

And much they talked of wandering out afar
Some day, to lands where many marvels are,
With still the Phrygian through all things to be
The leader unto all felicity.

Now at this time folk came unto the King
Who on a forest's borders dwelling were,
Wherein there roamed full many a dangerous thing,
As wolf and wild bull, lion and brown bear ;
But chiefly in that forest was the lair
Of a great boar that no man could withstand,
And many a woe he wrought upon the land.

Since long ago that men in Calydon
Held chase, no beast like him had once been seen.
He ruined vineyards lying in the sun,
After his harvesting the men must glean
What he had left ; right glad they had not been
Among the tall stalks of the ripening wheat,
The fell destroyer's fatal tusks to meet.

For often would the lonely man entrapped
In vain from his dire fury strive to hide
In some thick hedge, and other whiles it happed
Some careless stranger by his place would ride,
And the tusks smote his fallen horse's side,
And what help then to such a wretch could come
With sword he could not draw, and far from home ?

Or else girls, sent their water-jars to fill,
Would come back pale, too terrified to cry,
Because they had but seen him from the hill ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Or else again with side rent wretchedly,
Some hapless damsel midst the brake would lie.
Shortly to say, there neither man nor maid
Was safe afield whether they wrought or played.

Therefore were come these dwellers by the wood
To pray the King brave men to them to send,
That they might live; and if he deemed it good,
That Atys with the other knights should wend.
They thought their grief the easier should have end;
For both by gods and men they knew him loved,
And easily by hope of glory moved.

“O Sire,” they said, “thou know’st how Hercules
Was not content to wait till folk asked aid,
But sought the pests among their guarded trees;
Thou know’st what name the Theban Cadmus made,
And how the bull of Marathon was laid
Dead on the fallows of the Athenian land,
And how folk worshipped Atalanta’s hand.

“Fair would thy son’s name look upon the roll
Wherein such noble deeds as this are told;
And great delight shall surely fill thy soul,
Thinking upon his deeds when thou art old,
And thy brave heart is waxen faint and cold:
Dost thou not know, O King, how men will strive
That they, when dead, still in their sons may live?”

He shuddered as they spoke, because he thought,
Most certainly a winning tale is this
To draw him from the net where he is caught,

THE SON OF CRÆSUS

For hearts of men grow weary of all bliss ;
Nor is he one to be content with his,
If he should hear the trumpet-blast of fame
And far-off people calling on his name.

“ Good friends,” he said, “ go, get ye back again,
And doubt not I will send you men to slay
This pest ye fear : yet shall your prayer be vain
If ye with any other speak to-day ;
And for my son, with me he needs must stay,
For mighty cares oppress the Lydian land.
Fear not, for ye shall have a noble band.”

And with that promise must they be content,
And so departed, having feasted well.
And yet some god or other ere they went,
If they were silent, this their tale must tell
To more than one man ; therefore it befell,
That at the last Prince Atys knew the thing,
And came with angry eyes unto the King.

“ Father,” he said, “ since when am I grown vile ?
Since when am I grown helpless of my hands ?
Or else what folk, with words enwrought with guile,
Thine ears have poisoned ; that when far-off lands
My fame might fill, by thy most strange commands
I needs must stay within this slothful home,
Whereto would God that I had never come ?

“ What ! wilt thou take mine honour quite away ?
Wouldst thou, that, as with her I just have wed
I sit among thy folk at end of day,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

She should be ever turning round her head
To watch some man for war apparelléd
Because he wears a sword that he may use,
Which grace to me thou ever wilt refuse ?

“Or dost thou think, when thou hast run thy race
And thou art gone, and in thy stead I reign,
The people will do honour to my place,
Or that the lords leal men will still remain,
If yet my father’s sword be sharp in vain ?
If on the wall his armour still hang up,
While for a spear I hold a drinking-cup ?”

“O Son !” quoth Cræsus, “well I know thee brave,
And worthy of high deeds of chivalry ;
Therefore the more thy dear life would I save,
Which now is threatened by the gods on high ;
Three times one night I dreamed I saw thee die,
Slain by some deadly iron-pointed thing,
While weeping lords stood round thee in a ring.”

Then loud laughed Atys, and he said again,
“Father, and did this ugly dream tell thee
What day it was on which I should be slain ?
As may the gods grant I may one day be,
And not from sickness die right wretchedly,
Groaning with pain, my lords about my bed,
Wishing to God that I were fairly dead ;

“But slain in battle, as the Lydian kings
Have died ere now, in some great victory,
While all about the Lydian shouting rings

THE SON OF CRÆSUS

Death to the beaten foemen as they fly.
What death but this, O father ! should I die ?
But if my life by iron shall be done,
What steel to-day shall glitter in the sun ?

“Yea, father, if to thee it seemeth good
To keep me from the bright steel-bearing throng,
Let me be brave at least within the wood ;
For surely, if thy dream be true, no wrong
Can hap to me from this beast’s tushes strong :
Unless perchance the beast is grown so wise,
He haunts the forest clad in Lydian guise.”

Then Cræsus said : “ O Son, I love thee so,
That thou shalt do thy will upon this tide :
But since unto this hunting thou must go,
A trusty friend along with thee shall ride,
Who not for anything shall leave thy side.
I think, indeed, he loves thee well enow
To thrust his heart ’twixt thee and any blow.

“Go then, O Son, and if by some short span
Thy life be measured, how shall it harm thee,
If while life last thou art a happy man ?
And thou art happy ; only unto me
Is trembling left, and infelicity :
The trembling of the man who loves on earth,
But unto thee is hope and present mirth.

“Nay, be thou not ashamed, for on this day
I fear not much : thou read’st my dream aright,
No teeth or claws shall take thy life away.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And it may chance, ere thy last glorious fight,
I shall be blinded by the endless night ;
And brave Adrastus on this day shall be
Thy safeguard, and shall give good heart to me.

“ Go then, and send him hither, and depart ;
And as the heroes did so mayst thou do,
Winning such fame as well may please thine heart.”
With that word from the King did Atys go,
Who, left behind, sighed, saying, “ May it be so,
Even as I hope ; and yet I would to God
These men upon my threshold ne’er had trod.”

So when Adrastus to the King was come
He said unto him, “ O my Phrygian friend,
We in this land have given thee a home,
And ’gainst all foes your life will we defend :
Wherefore for us that life thou shouldest spend,
If any day there should be need therefor ;
And now a trusty friend I need right sore.

“ Doubtless ere now thou hast heard many say
There is a doom that threatens my son’s life ;
Therefore this place is stript of arms to-day,
And therefore still bides Atys with his wife,
And tempts not any god by raising strife ;
Yet none the less by no desire of his,
To whom would war be most abundant bliss.

“ And since to-day some glory he may gain
Against a monstrous bestial enemy,
And that the meaning of my dream is plain ;

THE SON OF CRÆSUS

That saith that he by steel alone shall die,
His burning wish I may not well deny,
Therefore afield to-morrow doth he wend
And herein mayst thou show thyself my friend—

“For thou as captain of his band shalt ride,
And keep a watchful eye of everything,
Nor leave him whatsoever may betide :
Lo, thou art brave, the son of a great king,
And with thy praises doth this city ring,
Why should I tell thee what a name those gain,
Who dying for their friends, die not in vain?”

Then said Adrastus, “Now were I grown base
Beyond all words, if I should spare for aught
In guarding him, so sit with smiling face,
And of this matter take no further thought,
Because with my life shall his life be bought,
If ill should hap; and no ill fate it were,
If I should die for what I hold so dear.”

Then went Adrastus, and next morn all things,
That 'longed unto the hunting were well dight,
And forth they went clad as the sons of kings.
Fair was the morn, as through the sunshine bright
They rode, the Prince half wild with great delight,
The Phrygian smiling on him soberly,
And ever looking round with watchful eye.

So through the city all the rout rode fast,
With many a great black-muzzled yellow hound;
And then the teeming country-side they passed,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Until they came to sour and rugged ground,
And there rode up a little heathy mound,
That overlooked the scrubby woods and low,
That of the beast's lair somewhat they might know.

And there a good man of the country-side
Showed them the places where he mostly lay ;
And they, descending, through the wood did ride,
And followed on his tracks for half the day.
And at the last they brought him well to bay,
Within an oozy space amidst the wood,
About the which a ring of alders stood.

So when the hounds' changed voices clear they heard,
With hearts aflame on towards him straight they drew,
Atys the first of all, of nought afeard,
Except that folk should say some other slew
The beast ; and lustily his horn he blew,
Going afoot ; then, mighty spear in hand,
Adrastus headed all the following band.

Now when they came unto the plot of ground
Where stood the boar, hounds dead about him lay
Or sprawled about, bleeding from many a wound,
But still the others held him well at bay,
Nor had he been bestead thus ere that day.
But yet, seeing Atys, straight he rushed at him,
Speckled with foam, bleeding in flank and limb.

Then Atys stood and cast his well-steeled spear
With a great shout, and straight and well it flew ;
For now the broad blade cutting through the ear,

THE SON OF CRÆSUS

A stream of blood from out the shoulder drew.
And therewithal another, no less true,
Adrastus cast, whereby the boar had died :
But Atys drew the bright sword from his side,

And to the tottering beast he drew anigh :
But as the sun's rays ran adown the blade
Adrastus threw a javelin hastily,
For of the mighty beast was he afraid,
Lest by his wounds he should not yet be stayed,
But with a last rush cast his life away,
And dying there, the son of Cræsus slay.

But even as the feathered dart he hurled,
His strained, despairing eyes beheld the end,
And changed seemed all the fashion of the world,
And past and future into one did blend,
As he beheld the fixed eyes of his friend,
That no reproach had in them, and no fear,
For Death had seized him ere he thought him near.

Adrastus shrieked, and running up he caught
The falling man, and from his bleeding side
Drew out the dart, and seeing that death had brought
Deliverance to him, he thereby had died ;
But ere his hand the luckless steel could guide,
And he the refuge of poor souls could win,
The horror-stricken huntsmen had rushed in.

And these, with blows and cries he heeded nought,
His unresisting hands made haste to bind ;
Then of the alder-boughs a bier they wrought,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And laid the corpse thereon, and 'gan to wind
Homeward amidst the tangled wood and blind,
And going slowly, at the eventide,
Some leagues from Sardis did that day abide.

Onward next morn the slaughtered man they bore,
With him that slew him, and at end of day
They reached the city, and with mourning sore
Toward the King's palace did they take their way.
He in an open western chamber lay
Feasting, though inwardly his heart did burn
Until that Atys should to him return.

And when those wails first smote upon his ear
He set the wine-cup down, and to his feet
He rose, and bitter all-consuming fear
Swallowed his joy, and nigh he went to meet
That which was coming through the weeping street:
But in the end he thought it good to wait,
And stood there doubting all the ill of fate.

But when at last up to that royal place
Folk brought the thing he once had held so dear,
Still stood the King, staring with ghastly face
As they brought forth Adrastus and the bier,
But spoke at last, slowly without a tear,
"O Phrygian man, that I did purify,
Is it through thee that Atys came to die?"

"O King," Adrastus said, "take now my life,
With whatso torment seemeth good to thee,
As my word went, for I would end this strife,

THE SON OF CRÆSUS

And underneath the earth lie quietly ;
Nor is it my will here alive to be :
For as my brother, so Prince Atys died,
And this unlucky hand some god did guide."

Then as a man constrained, the tale he told
From end to end, nor spared himself one whit :
And as he spoke, the wood did still behold,
The trodden grass, and Atys dead on it ;
And many a change o'er the King's face did flit
Of kingly rage, and hatred and despair,
As on the slayer's face he still did stare.

At last he said, "Thy death avails me nought,
The gods themselves have done this bitter deed,
That I was all too happy was their thought,
Therefore thy heart is dead and mine doth bleed,
And I am helpless as a trodden weed :
Thou art but as the handle of the spear,
The caster sits far off from any fear.

"Yes, if thy hurt they meant, I can do this,—
—Loose him and let him go in peace from me—
I will not slay the slayer of all my bliss ;
Yet go, poor man, for when thy face I see
I curse the gods for their felicity.
Surely some other slayer they would have found,
If thou hadst long ago been under ground.

"Alas, Adrastus ! in my inmost heart
I knew the gods would one day do this thing,
But deemed indeed that it would be thy part

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

To comfort me amidst my sorrowing ;
Make haste to go, for I am still a King !
Madness may take me, I have many hands
Who will not spare to do my worst commands."

With that Adrastus' bonds were done away,
And forthwith to the city gates he ran,
And on the road where they had been that day
Rushed through the gathering night; and some lone man
Beheld next day his visage wild and wan,
Peering from out a thicket of the wood
Where he had spilt that well-belovéd blood.

And now the day of burial pomp must be,
And to those rites all lords of Lydia came
About the King, and that day, they and he
Cast royal gifts of rich things on the flame ;
But while they stood and wept, and called by name
Upon the dead, amidst them came a man
With raiment rent, and haggard face and wan :

Who when the marshals would have thrust him out
And men looked strange on him, began to say,
"Surely the world is changed since ye have doubt
Of who I am ; nay, turn me not away,
For ye have called me princely ere to-day—
Adrastus, son of Gordius, a great king,
Where unto Pallas Phrygian maidens sing.

"O Lydians, many a rich thing have ye cast
Into this flame, but I myself will give
A greater gift, since now I see at last

THE SON OF CROESUS

The gods are wearied for that still I live,
And with their will, why should I longer strive?
Atys, O Atys, thus I give to thee
A life that lived for thy felicity."

And therewith from his side a knife he drew,
And, crying out, upon the pile he leapt,
And with one mighty stroke himself he slew.
So there these princes both together slept,
And their light ashes, gathered up, were kept
Within a golden vessel wrought all o'er
With histories of this hunting of the boar.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

A GENTLE wind had risen midst his tale,
That bore the sweet scents of the fertile vale
In at the open windows ; and these men
The burden of their years scarce noted then,
Soothed by the sweet luxurious summer time,
And by the cadence of that ancient rhyme,
Spite of its saddening import ; nay, indeed,
Of some such thoughts the Wanderers had need
As that tale gave them—Yea, a man shall be
A wonder for his glorious chivalry,
First in all wisdom, of a prudent mind,
Yet none the less him too his fate shall find
Unfenced by these, a man 'mongst other men.
Yea, and will Fortune pick out, now and then,
The noblest for the anvil of her blows ;
Great names are few, and yet, indeed, who knows
What greater souls have fallen 'neath the stroke
Of careless fate ? Purlblind are most of folk,
The happy are the masters of the earth
Which ever give small heed to hapless worth ;
So goes the world, and this we needs must bear
Like eld and death : yet there were some men there
Who drank in silence to the memory
Of those who failed on earth great men to be,
Though better than the men who won the crown.

JULY

But when the sun was fairly going down
They left the house, and, following up the stream,
In the low sun saw the kingfisher gleam
'Twixt bank and alder, and the grebe steal out
From the high sedge, and, in his restless doubt,
Dive down, and rise to see what men were there ;
They saw the swallow chase high up in air
The circling gnats ; the shaded dusky pool
Broke by the splashing chub ; the ripple cool,
Rising and falling, of some distant weir
They heard, till it oppressed the listening ear,
As twilight grew : so back they turned again
Glad of their rest, and pleasure after pain.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

WITHIN the gardens once again they met,
That now the roses did well-nigh forget,
For hot July was drawing to an end,
And August came the fainting year to mend
With fruit and grain ; so 'neath the trellises,
Nigh blossomless, did they lie well at ease,
And watched the poppies burn across the grass,
And o'er the bindweed's bells the brown bee pass
Still murmuring of his gains : windless and bright
The morn had been, to help their dear delight ;
But heavy clouds ere noon grew round the sun,
And, halfway to the zenith, wild and dun
The sky grew, and the thunder growled afar ;
But, ere the steely clouds began their war,
A change there came, and, as by some great hand,
The clouds that hung in threatening o'er the land
Were drawn away ; then a light wind arose
That shook the light stems of that flowery close,
And made men sigh for pleasure ; therewithal
Did mirth upon the feasting elders fall,
And they no longer watched the lowering sky,
But called aloud for some new history.

Then spoke the Suabian, "Sirs, this tale is told
Among our searchers for fine stones and gold,
And though I tell it wrong be good to me ;
For I the written book did never see,
Made by some Fleming, as I think, wherein
Is told this tale of wilfulness and sin."

THE WATCHING OF THE FALCON

ARGUMENT

THE case of this falcon was such, that whoso watched it without sleeping for seven days and seven nights, had his first wish granted him by a fay lady, that appeared to him thereon; and some wished one thing, and some another. But a certain king, who watched the falcon daily, would wish for nought but the love of that fay; which wish being accomplished, was afterwards his ruin.

ACROSS the sea a land there is,
Where, if fate will, may men have bliss,
For it is fair as any land :
There hath the reaper a full hand,
While in the orchard hangs aloft
The purple fig, a-growing soft ;
And fair the trellised vine-bunches
Are swung across the high elm-trees ;
And in the rivers great fish play,
While over them pass day by day
The laden barges to their place.
There maids are straight, and fair of face,
And men are stout for husbandry,
And all is well as it can be
Upon this earth where all has end.
For on them God is pleased to send
The gift of Death down from above,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

That envy, hatred, and hot love,
Knowledge with hunger by his side,
And avarice and deadly pride,
There may have end like everything
Both to the shepherd and the king :
Lest this green earth become but hell
If folk for ever there should dwell.

Full little most men think of this,
But half in woe and half in bliss
They pass their lives, and die at last
Unwilling, though their lot be cast
In wretched places of the earth,
Where men have little joy from birth
Until they die ; in no such case
Were those who tilled this pleasant place.

There soothly men were loth to die,
Though sometimes in his misery
A man would say " Would I were dead ! "
Alas ! full little likelihead
That he should live for ever there.

So folk within that country fair
Lived on, nor from their memories drave
The thought of what they could not have,
And without need tormented still
Each other with some bitter ill ;
Yea, and themselves too, growing grey
With dread of some long-lingering day,
That never came ere they were dead
With green sods growing on the head ;
Nowise content with what they had,
But falling still from good to bad

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

While hard they sought the hopeless best ;
And seldom happy or at rest
Until at last with lessening blood
One foot within the grave they stood.

Now so it chanced that in this land
There did a certain castle stand,
Set all alone deep in the hills,
Amid the sound of falling rills
Within a valley of sweet grass,
To which there went one narrow pass
Through the dark hills, but seldom trod.
Rarely did horse-hoof press the sod
About the quiet weedy moat,
Where unscared did the great fish float ;
Because men dreaded there to see
The uncouth things of faërie ;
Nathless by some few fathers old
These tales about the place were told :
That neither squire nor seneschal
Or varlet came in bower or hall,
Yet all things were in order due,
Hangings of gold and red and blue,
And tables with fair service set ;
Cups that had paid the Cæsar's debt
Could he have laid his hands on them ;
Dorsars, with pearls in every hem,
And fair embroidered gold-wrought things,
Fit for a company of kings ;
And in the chambers dainty beds,
With pillows dight for fair young heads ;

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And horses in the stables were,
And in the cellars wine full clear
And strong, and casks of ale and mead ;
Yea, all things a great lord could need.

For whom these things were ready there
None knew ; but if one chanced to fare
Into that place at Easter-tide,
There would he find a falcon tied
Unto a pillar of the Hall ;
And such a fate to him would fall,
That if unto the seventh night,
He watched the bird from dark to light,
And light to dark unceasingly,
On the last evening he should see
A lady beautiful past words ;
Then, were he come of clowns or lords,
Son of a swineherd or a king,
There must she grant him anything
Perforce, that he might dare to ask,
And do his very hardest task.

But if he slumbered, ne'er again
The wretch would wake, for he was slain
Helpless, by hands he could not see,
And torn and mangled wretchedly.

Now said these elders—Ere this tide
Full many folk this thing have tried,
But few have got much good thereby ;
For first, a many came to die
By slumbering ere their watch was done ;
Or else they saw that lovely one,

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

And mazed, they knew not what to say;
Or asked some toy for all their pay,
That easily they might have won,
Nor staked their lives and souls thereon;
Or asking, asked for some great thing
That was their bane; as to be king
One asked, and died the morrow morn
That he was crowned, of all forlorn.

Yet thither came a certain man,
Who from being poor great riches wan
Past telling, whose grandsons now are
Great lords thereby in peace and war.
And in their coat-of-arms they bear,
Upon a field of azure fair,
A castle and a falcon, set
Below a chief of golden fret.

And in our day a certain knight
Prayed to be worsted in no fight,
And so it happed to him: yet he
Died none the less most wretchedly,
And all his prowess was in vain,
For by a losel was he slain,
As on the highway side he slept
One summer night, of no man kept.

Such tales as these the fathers old
About that lonely castle told;
And in their day the King must try
Himself to prove that mystery,
Although, unless the fay could give
For ever on the earth to live,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Nought could he ask that he had not :
For boundless riches had he got,
Fair children, and a faithful wife ;
And happily had passed his life,
And all fulfilled of victory,
Yet was he fain this thing to see.

So towards the mountains he set out
One noontide, with a gallant rout
Of knights and lords, and as the day
Began to fail came to the way
Where he must enter all alone,
Between the dreary walls of stone.
Thereon to that fair company
He bade farewell, who wistfully
Looked backward oft as home they rode,
But in the entry he abode
Of that rough unknown narrowing pass,
Where twilight at the high noon was.

Then onward he began to ride :
Smooth rose the rocks on every side,
And seemed as they were cut by man ;
Adown them ever water ran,
But they of living things were bare,
Yea, not a blade of grass grew there ;
And underfoot rough was the way,
For scattered all about there lay
Great jagged pieces of black stone.
Throughout the pass the wind did moan,
With such wild noises, that the King
Could almost think he heard something
Spoken of men ; as one might hear

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

The voices of folk standing near
One's chamber wall : yet saw he nought
Except those high walls strangely wrought,
And overhead the strip of sky.

So, going onward painfully,
He met therein no evil thing,
But came about the sun-setting
Unto the opening of the pass,
And thence beheld a vale of grass
Bright with the yellow daffodil ;
And all the vale the sun did fill
With his last glory. Midmost there
Rose up a stronghold, built four-square,
Upon a flowery grassy mound,
That moat and high wall ran around.

Thereby he saw a walled pleasance,
With walks and sward fit for the dance
Of Arthur's court in its best time,
That seemed to feel some magic clime ;
For though through all the vale outside
Things were as in the April-tide,
And daffodils and cowslips grew
And hidden the March violets blew,
Within the bounds of that sweet close
Was trellised the bewildering rose ;
There was the lily over-sweet,
And starry pinks for garlands meet ;
And apricots hung on the wall
And midst the flowers did peaches fall,
And nought had blemish there or spot,
For in that place decay was not.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Silent awhile the King abode
Beholding all, then on he rode
And to the castle-gate drew nigh,
Till fell the drawbridge silently,
And when across it he did ride
He found the great gates open wide,
And entered there, but as he passed
The gates were shut behind him fast,
But not before that he could see
The drawbridge rise up silently.

Then round he gazed oppressed with awe,
And there no living thing he saw
Except the sparrows in the eaves,
As restless as light autumn leaves
Blown by the fitful rainy wind.
Thereon his final goal to find,
He lighted off his war-horse good
And let him wander as he would,
When he had eased him of his gear ;
Then gathering heart against his fear,
Just at the silent end of day
Through the fair porch he took his way
And found at last a goodly hall
With glorious hangings on the wall,
Inwrought with trees of every clime,
And stories of the ancient time.
But all of sorcery they were,
For o'er the dais Venus fair,
Fluttered about by many a dove,
Made hopeless men for hopeless love,
Both sick and sorry ; there they stood

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

Wrought wonderfully in various mood,
But wasted all by that hid fire
Of measureless o'er-sweet desire,
And let the hurrying world go by
Forgetting all felicity.
But down the hall the tale was wrought
How Argo in old times was brought
To Colchis for the fleece of gold.
And on the other side was told
How mariners for long years came
To Circe, winning grief and shame,
Until at last by hardihead
And craft, Ulysses won her bed.

Long upon these the King did look,
And of them all good heed he took ;
To see if they would tell him aught
About the matter that he sought,
But all were of the times long past ;
So going all about, at last
When grown nigh weary of his search
A falcon on a silver perch,
Anigh the days did he see,
And wondered, because certainly
At his first coming 'twas not there ;
But 'neath the bird a scroll most fair,
With golden letters on the white
He saw, and in the dim twilight
By diligence could he read this:—

*“Ye who have not enow of bliss,
And in this hard world labour sore,*

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

*By manhood here may get you more,
And be fulfilled of everything,
Till ye be masters of the King.*

*And yet, since I who promise this
Am nowise God to give man bliss
Past ending, now in time beware,
And if you live in little care
Then turn aback and home again,
Lest unknown woe ye chance to gain
In wishing for a thing untried."*

A little while did he abide,
When he had read this, deep in thought,
Wondering indeed if there were aught
He had not got, that a wise man
Would wish ; yet in his mind it ran
That he might win a boundless realm,
Yea, come to wear upon his helm
The crown of the whole conquered earth ;
That all who lived thereon, from birth
To death should call him King and Lord,
And great kings tremble at his word,
Until in turn he came to die.
Therewith a little did he sigh,
But thought, " Of Alexander yet
Men talk, nor would they e'er forget
My name, if this should come to be,
Whoever should come after me :
But while I lay wrapped round with gold
Should tales and histories manifold
Be written of me, false and true ;

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

And as the time still onward drew
Almost a god would folk count me,
Saying, 'In our time none such be.'"
But therewith did he sigh again,
And said, "Ah, vain, and worse than vain
For though the world forget me nought,
Yet by that time should I be brought
Where all the world I should forget,
And bitterly should I regret
That I, from godlike great renown,
To helpless death must fall adown :
How could I bear to leave it all ?"

Then straight upon his mind did fall
Thoughts of old longings half forgot,
Matters for which his heart was hot
A while ago : whereof no more
He cared for some, and some right sore
Had vexed him, being fulfilled at last.
And when the thought of these had passed
Still something was there left behind,
That by no torturing of his mind
Could he in any language name,
Or into form of wishing frame.

At last he thought, "What matters it?
Before these seven days shall flit
Some great thing surely shall I find,
That gained will not leave grief behind,
Nor turn to deadly injury.
So now will I let these things be
And think of some unknown delight."

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Now, therewithal, was come the night,
And thus his watch was well begun :
And till the rising of the sun,
Waking, he paced about the hall,
And saw the hangings on the wall
Fade into nought, and then grow white
In patches by the pale moonlight,
And then again fade utterly
As still the moonbeams passed them by ;
Then in a while, with hope of day,
Begin a little to grow grey,
Until familiar things they grew, ;
As up at last the great sun drew,
And lit them with his yellow light
At ending of another night.

Then right glad was he of the day,
That passed with him in such-like way :
For neither man nor beast came near,
Nor any voices did he hear.
And when again it drew to night
Silent it passed, till first twilight
Of morning came, and then he heard
The feeble twittering of some bird,
That, in that utter silence drear,
Smote harsh and startling on his ear.

Therewith came on that lonely day
That passed him in no other way ;
And thus six days and nights went by
And nothing strange had come anigh.

And on that day he well-nigh deemed
That all that story had been dreamed ;

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

Daylight and dark, and night and day,
Passed ever in their wonted way ;
The wind played in the trees outside,
The rooks from out the high trees cried ;
And all seemed natural, frank, and fair,
With little signs of magic there.
Yet neither could he quite forget
That close with summer blossoms set,
And fruit hung on trees blossoming,
When all about was early spring.
Yea, if all this by man were made,
Strange was it that yet undecayed
The food lay on the tables still
Unchanged by man, that wine did fill
The golden cups, yet bright and red,
And all was so apparelléd
For guests that came not, yet was all
As though that servants filled the hall.
So waxed and waned his hopes, and still
He formed no wish for good or ill.
And while he thought of this and that
Upon his perch the falcon sat
Unfed, unhooded, his bright eyes
Beholders of the hard-earned prize,
Glancing around him restlessly,
As though he knew the time drew nigh
When this long watching should be done.

So little by little fell the sun,
From high noon unto sun-setting ;
And in that lapse of time the King,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Though still he woke, yet none the less
Was dreaming in his sleeplessness
Of this and that which he had done
Before this watch he had begun ;
Till, with a start, he looked at last
About him, and all dreams were past ;
For now, though it was past twilight
Without, within all grew as bright
As when the noon-sun smote the wall,
Though no lamp shone within the hall.

Then rose the King upon his feet,
And well-nigh heard his own heart beat,
And grew all pale for hope and fear,
As sound of footsteps caught his ear
But soft, and as some fair lady,
Going as gently as might be,
Stopped now and then awhile, distraught
By pleasant wanderings of sweet thought.

Nigher the sound came, and more nigh,
Until the King unwittingly
Trembled, and felt his hair arise,
But on the door still kept his eyes,
That opened soon, and in the light
There stepped alone a lady bright,
And made straight toward him up the hall.

In golden garments was she clad,
And round her waist a belt she had
Of emeralds fair, and from her feet,
That shod with gold the floor did meet,
She held the raiment daintily,
And on her golden head had she

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

A rose-wreath round a pearl-wrought crown.
Softly she walked with eyes cast down,
Nor looked she any other than
An earthly lady, though no man
Has seen so fair a thing as she.

So when her face the King could see
Still more he trembled, and he thought,
"Surely my wish is hither brought,
And this will be a goodly day
If for mine own I win this may."
And therewithal she drew anear
Until the trembling King could hear
Her very breathing, and she raised
Her head and on the King's face gazed
With serious eyes, and stopping there,
Swept from her shoulders her long hair,
And let her gown fall on her feet,
Then spoke in a clear voice and sweet:

"Well hast thou watched, so now, O King,
Be bold, and wish for some good thing;
And yet, I counsel thee, be wise.
Behold, spite of these lips and eyes,
Hundreds of years old now am I
And have seen joy and misery.
And thou, who yet hast lived in bliss,
I bid thee well consider this;
Better it were that men should live
As beasts, and take what earth can give,
The air, the warm sun and the grass
Until unto the earth they pass,
And gain perchance nought worse than rest,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Than that not knowing what is best
For sons of men, they needs must thirst
For what shall make their lives accurst.

“Therefore I bid thee now beware,
Lest getting something seeming fair,
Thou com'st in vain to long for more ;
Or lest the thing thou wishest for
Make thee unhappy till thou diest,
Or lest with speedy death thou buyest
A little hour of happiness
Or lazy joy with sharp distress.

“Alas, why say I this to thee,
For now I see full certainly,
That thou wilt ask for such a thing,
It had been best for thee to fling
Thy body from a mountain-top,
Or in a white-hot fire to drop,
Or ever thou hadst seen me here,
Nay then be speedy and speak clear.”

Then the King cried out eagerly,
Grown fearless, “Ah, be kind to me !
Thou knowest what I long for then !
Thou knowest that I, a king of men,
Will ask for nothing else than thee !
Thou didst not say this could not be,
And I have had enough of bliss,
If I may end my life with this.”

“Hearken,” she said, “what men will say
When they are mad ; before to-day
I knew that words such things could mean,
And wondered that it could have been.

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

"Think well, because this wished-for joy,
That surely will thy bliss destroy,
Will let thee live, until thy life
Is wrapped in such bewildering strife
That all thy days will seem but ill—
Now wilt thou wish for this thing still?"

"Wilt thou then grant it?" cried the King;
"Surely thou art an earthly thing,
And all this is but mockery,
And thou canst tell no more than I
What ending to my life shall be."

"Nay, then," she said, "I grant it thee
Perforce; come nigh, for I am thine
Until the morning sun doth shine,
And only coming time can prove
What thing I am."

Dizzy with love,
And with surprise struck motionless
That this divine thing, with far less
Of striving than a village maid,
Had yielded, there he stood afraid,
Spite of hot words and passionate,
And strove to think upon his fate.

But as he stood there, presently
With smiling face she drew anigh,
And on his face he felt her breath.
"O love," she said, "dost thou fear death?
Not till next morning shalt thou die,
Or fall into thy misery."
Then on his hand her hand did fall,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

And forth she led him down the hall,
Going full softly by his side.

“O love,” she said, “now well betide
The day whereon thou cam’st to me.
I would this night a year might be,
Yea, life-long ; such life as we have,
A thousand years from womb to grave.”

And then that clinging hand seemed worth
Whatever joy was left on earth,
And every trouble he forgot,
And time and death remembered not :
Kinder she grew, she clung to him
With loving arms, her eyes did swim
With love and pity, as he strove
To show the wisdom of his love ;
With trembling lips she praised his choice,
And said, “Ah, well may’st thou rejoice,
Well may’st thou think this one short night
Worth years of other men’s delight,
If thy heart as mine own heart is,
Sunk in a boundless sea of bliss ;
O love, rejoice with me ! rejoice !”

But as she spoke, her honied voice
Trembled, and midst of sobs she said,
“O love, and art thou still afraid ?
Return, then, to thine happiness,
Nor will I love thee any less ;
But watch thee as a mother might
Her child at play.”

With strange delight

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

He stammered out, "Nay, keep thy tears
For me, and for my ruined years
Weep, love, that I may love thee more,
My little hour will soon be o'er."

"Ah, love," she said, "and thou art wise
As men are, with long miseries
Buying these idle words and vain,
My foolish love, with lasting pain ;
And yet, thou wouldst have died at last
If in all wisdom thou hadst passed
Thy weary life : forgive me then,
In pitying the sad life of men."

Then in such bliss his soul did swim,
But tender music unto him
Her words were ; death and misery
But empty names were grown to be,
As from that place his steps she drew,
And dark the hall behind them grew.

BUT end comes to all earthly bliss,
And by his choice full short was his ;
And in the morning, grey and cold,
Beside the daïs did she hold
His trembling hand, and wistfully
He, doubting what his fate should be,
Gazed at her solemn eyes, that now,
Beneath her calm, untroubled brow,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Were fixed on his wild face and wan ;
At last she said, " Oh, hapless man,
Depart ! thy full wish hast thou had ;
A little time thou hast been glad,
Thou shalt be sorry till thou die.

" And though, indeed, full fain am I
This might not be ; nathless, as day
Night follows, colourless and grey,
So this shall follow thy delight,
Your joy hath ending with last night—
Nay, peace, and hearken to thy fate.

" Strife without peace, early and late,
Lasting long after thou art dead,
And laid with earth upon thine head ;
War without victory shalt thou have,
Defeat, nor honour shalt thou save ;
Thy fair land shall be rent and torn,
Thy people be of all forlorn,
And all men curse thee for this thing."

She loosed his hand, but yet the King
Said, " Yea, and I may go with thee ?
Why should we part ? then let things be
E'en as they will ! " " Poor man," she said,
" Thou ravest ; our hot love is dead,
If ever it had any life :

Go, make thee ready for the strife
Wherein thy days shall soon be wrapped ;
And of the things that here have happed
Make thou such joy as thou may'st do ;
But I from this place needs must go,
Nor shalt thou ever see me more

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

Until thy troubled life is o'er :
Alas ! to say 'farewell' to thee
Were nought but bitter mockery.
Fare as thou may'st, and with good heart
Play to the end thy wretched part."

Therewith she turned and went from him,
And with such pain his eyes did swim
He scarce could see her leave the place ;
And then, with troubled and pale face,
He gat him thence : and soon he found
His good horse in the base-court bound ;
So, loosing him, forth did he ride,
For the great gates were open wide,
And flat the heavy drawbridge lay.

So by the middle of the day,
That murky pass had he gone through,
And come to country that he knew ;
And homeward turned his horse's head,
And passing village and homestead
Nigh to his palace came at last ;
And still the further that he passed
From that strange castle of the fays,
More dreamlike seemed those seven days,
And dreamlike the delicious night ;
And like a dream the shoulders white,
And clinging arms and yellow hair,
And dreamlike the sad morning there.
Until at last he 'gan to deem

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

That all might well have been a dream—
Yet why was life a weariness?
What meant this sting of sharp distress?
This longing for a hopeless love,
No sighing from his heart could move?

Or else, "She did not come and go
As fays might do, but soft and slow
Her lovely feet fell on the floor;
She set her fair hand to the door
As any dainty maid might do;
And though, indeed, there are but few
Beneath the sun as fair as she,
She seemed a fleshly thing to be.
Perchance a merry mock this is,
And I may some day have the bliss
To see her lovely face again,
As smiling she makes all things plain.
And then as I am still a king,
With me may she make tarrying
Full long, yea, till I come to die."

Therewith at last being come anigh
Unto his very palace gate,
He saw his knights and squires wait
His coming, therefore on the ground
He lighted, and they flocked around
Till he should tell them of his fare.
Then mocking said he, "Ye may dare,
The worst man of you all, to go
And watch as I was bold to do;
For nought I heard except the wind,

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

And nought I saw to call to mind."
So said he, but they noted well
That something more he had to tell
If it had pleased him; one old man,
Beholding his changed face and wan,
Muttered, "Would God it might be so!
Alas! I fear what fate may do;
Too much good fortune hast thou had
By anything to be more glad
Than thou hast been, I fear thee then
Lest thou becom'st a curse to men."
But to his place the doomed King passed,
And all remembrance strove to cast
From out his mind of that past day,
And spent his life in sport and play.

GREAT among other kings, I said
He was before he first was led
Unto that castle of the fays,
But soon he lost his happy days
And all his goodly life was done.
And first indeed his best-loved son,
The very apple of his eye,
Waged war against him bitterly;
And when this son was overcome
And taken, and folk led him home,
And him the King had gone to meet,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Meaning with gentle words and sweet
To win him to his love again,
By his own hand he found him slain.

I know not if the doomed King yet
Remembered the fay lady's threat,
But troubles upon troubles came :
His daughter next was brought to shame,
Who unto all eyes seemed to be
The image of all purity,
And fleeing from the royal place
The King no more beheld her face.
Then next a folk that came from far
Sent to the King great threats of war,
But he, full-fed of victory,
Deemed this a little thing to be,
And thought the troubles of his home
Thereby he well might overcome
Amid the hurry of the fight.

His foemen seemed of little might,
Although they thronged like summer bees
About the outlying villages,
And on the land great ruin brought.
Well, he this barbarous people sought
With such an army as seemed meet
To put the world beneath his feet ;
The day of battle came, and he,
Flushed with the hope of victory,
Grew happy, as he had not been
Since he those glorious eyes had seen.

They met,—his solid ranks of steel
There scarcely more the darts could feel

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

Of those new foemen, than if they
Had been a hundred miles away :—
They met,—a storied folk were his
To whom sharp war had long been bliss,
A thousand years of memories
Were flashing in their shielded eyes ;
And grave philosophers they had
To bid them ever to be glad
To meet their death and get life done
Midst glorious deeds from sire to son.

And those they met were beasts, or worse,
To whom life seemed a jest, a curse ;
Of fame and name they had not heard ;
Honour to them was but a word,
A word spoke in another tongue ;
No memories round their banners clung,
No walls they knew, no art of war,
By hunger were they driven afar
Unto the place whereon they stood,
Ravening for bestial joys and blood.

No wonder if these barbarous men
Were slain by hundreds to each ten
Of the King's brave well-armoured folk,
No wonder if their charges broke
To nothing, on the walls of steel,
And back the baffled hordes must reel.
So stood throughout a summer day
Scarce touched the King's most fair array,
Yet as it drew to even-tide
The foe still surged on every side,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

As hopeless hunger-bitten men,
About his folk grown wearied then.
Therewith the King beheld that crowd
Howling and dusk, and cried aloud,
“What do ye, warriors? and how long
Shall weak folk hold in check the strong?
Nay, forward banners! end the day
And show these folk how brave men play.”
The young knights shouted at his word,
But the old folk in terror heard
The shouting run adown the line,
And saw men flush as if with wine—
“O Sire,” they said, “the day is sure,
Nor will these folk the night endure
Beset with misery and fears.”
Alas! they spoke to heedless ears;
For scarce one look on them he cast
But forward through the ranks he passed,
And cried out, “Who will follow me
To win a fruitful victory?”
And toward the foe in haste he spurred,
And at his back their shouts he heard,
Such shouts as he ne’er heard again.

They met—ere moonrise all the plain
Was filled by men in hurrying flight,
The relics of that shameful fight;
The close array, the full-armed men,
The ancient fame availed not then,
The dark night only was a friend
To bring that slaughter to an end;

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

And surely there the King had died,
But driven by that back-rushing tide
Against his will he needs must flee ;
And as he pondered bitterly
On all that wreck that he had wrought,
From time to time indeed he thought
Of the fay woman's dreadful threat.

“ But everything was not lost yet,”
Next day he said, great was the rout
And shameful beyond any doubt,
But since indeed at eventide
The flight began, not many died,
And gathering all the stragglers now
His troops still made a gallant show—
Alas ! it was a show indeed ;
Himself desponding, did he lead
His beaten men against the foe,
Thinking at least to lie alow
Before the final rout should be.
But scarce upon the enemy
Could these, whose shaken banners shook
The frightened world, now dare to look ;
Nor yet could the doomed King die there
A death he once had held most fair ;
Amid unwounded men he came
Back to his city, bent with shame,
Unkingly, midst his great distress,
Yea, weeping at the bitterness
Of women's curses that did greet
His passage down the troubled street.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

But sight of all the things they loved,
The memory of their manhood moved
Within the folk, and aged men
And boys must think of battle then.
And men that had not seen the foe
Must clamour to the war to go.
So a great army poured once more
From out the city, and before
The very gates they fought again,
But their late valour was in vain ;
They died indeed, and that was good,
But nought they gained for all the blood
Poured out like water ; for the foe,
Men might have stayed a while ago,
A match for very gods were grown,
So like the field in June-tide mown
The King's men fell, and but in vain
The remnant strove the town to gain ;
Whose battlements were nought to stay
An untaught foe upon that day,
Though many a tale the annals told
Of sieges in the days of old,
When all the world then knew of war
From that fair place was driven afar.

As for the King, a charmed life
He seemed to bear ; from out that strife
He came unhurt, and he could see,
As down the valley he did flee
With his most wretched company,
His palace flaming to the sky.

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

Then in the very midst of woe
His yearning thoughts would backward go
Unto the castle of the fay ;
He muttered, " Shall I curse that day,
The last delight that I have had,
For certainly I then was glad ?
And who knows if what men call bliss
Had been much better now than this
When I am hastening to the end."

That fearful rest, that dreaded friend,
That Death, he did not gain as yet ;
A band of men he soon did get,
A ruined rout of bad and good,
With whom within the tangled wood,
The rugged mountain, he abode,
And thenceforth oftentimes they rode
Into the fair land once called his ;
And yet but little came of this,
Except more woe for Heaven to see,
Some little added misery
Unto that miserable realm :
The barbarous foe did overwhelm
The cities and the fertile plain,
And many a peaceful man was slain,
And many a maiden brought to shame,
And yielded towns were set aflame ;
For all the land was masterless.

Long dwelt the King in great distress,
From wood to mountain ever tost,
Mourning for all that he had lost,
Until it chanced upon a day,

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

Asleep in early morn he lay,
And in a vision there did see
Clad all in black, that fay lady
Whereby all this had come to pass,
But dim as in a misty glass:
She said, "I come thy death to tell,
Yet now to thee may say 'farewell,'
For in a short space wilt thou be
Within an endless dim country
Where thou may'st well win woe or bliss."
Therewith she stooped his lips to kiss
And vanished straightway from his sight.
So waking there he sat upright
And looked around, but nought could see
And heard but song-birds' melody,
For that was the first break of day.

Then with a sigh adown he lay
And slept, nor ever woke again,
For in that hour was he slain
By stealthy traitors as he slept.

He of a few was much bewept,
But of most men was well forgot
While the town's ashes still were hot
The foeman on that day did burn.

As for the land, great Time did turn
The bloody fields to deep green grass,
And from the minds of men did pass
The memory of that time of woe,
And at this day all things are so
As first I said ; a land it is

WATCHING OF THE FALCON

Where men may dwell in rest and bliss
If so they will—Who yet will not,
Because their hasty hearts are hot
With foolish hate, and longing vain
The sire and dam of grief and pain.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE

NEATH the bright sky cool grew the weary earth,
And many a bud in that fair hour had birth
Upon the garden bushes ; in the west
The sky got ready for the great sun's rest,
And all was fresh and lovely ; none the less
Although those old men shared the happiness
Of the bright eye, 'twas mixed with memories
Of how they might in old times have been wise,
Not casting by for very wilfulness
What wealth might come their changing life to bless ;
Lulling their hearts to sleep, amid the cold
Of bitter times, that so they might behold
Some joy at last, e'en if it lingered long.
That, wearing not their souls with grief and wrong,
They still might watch the changing world go by,
Content to live, content at last to die.

Alas ! if they had reached content at last,
It was perforce when all their strength was past ;
And after loss of many days once bright,
With foolish hopes of unattained delight.